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OR,

Yank Yellowbird's Fiery Gantlet.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "YANK YELLOWBIRD," "WILD
WEST WALT," "HOT HEART," "DEEP
DUKE," "BLUFF BURKE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WITHIN AN INCH OF HIS LIFE.

BUCK HAMPTON made a sudden start, but it was hardly noticeable because of the long bound ahead taken at the same moment by his horse.

The crack of a rifle had sounded in the underbrush, and a bullet had passed so close to Buck Hampton's head that it had seemed like a singing demon.

As soon as possible he checked his horse, and then, unslinging his rifle, sat looking toward the point from which the shot had come.

"A would-be assassin, of course!" he thought. "I feel assured 'twas no chance shot. Let the scoundrel show himself and I will take my turn. He came within an inch of my life; I may get nearer than that to his."

Hampton was reckless to remain sitting in the saddle. He knew this, but did not see fit to

"MY GOD!" HE GASPED, "WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? SHE COMES FROM ZORA, AND IT IS AN AWFUL MESSAGE SHE BEARS!"

dismount. The underbrush concealed the late marksman, yet Hampton had an idea that if he tried to shoot again *he*, not the unknown, would win a point.

Suddenly a man arose in the midst of the bushes.

The horseman saw that he was an Indian, and the half-lowered rifle arose quickly to his shoulder. He did not fire. The late marksman cast one glance over his shoulder, and then plunged into the bushes with panther-like quickness. One moment he was visible; the next, before Buck could fire, he was gone.

The crashing of the bushes betrayed his rapid retreat.

Buck could not but wonder why the fellow had retreated in this way, when, if he saw fit to retreat at all, he might have gone secretly; but the young man's horse gave a clew to the mystery by suddenly looking toward the rear.

His master turned his head and saw another rider approaching, mounted on a very bony, homely horse. The manner of this horseman was friendly enough, and as it seemed that it was his advance which had frightened away the assassin, Buck silently awaited his arrival.

The stranger nodded genially.

"Hullo, mister!" said he; "b'en havin' an artom o' artillery practice?"

"No," replied Hampton, speaking to the point; "it was the other man who fired, and he made me his target."

"I take it he didn't hit the bull's-eye."

"He missed me."

"It's an egregious pity you didn't hit him."

"He fled, like the coward he was."

"Went more like a jack-rabbit, I consait, but that part ain't material. I'm glad nobody ain't hurt, an' when I say that, I mean you an' your hoss. It'd be a mighty good deed ter stop that red insex short."

"Do you know him?"

"Can't say I was ever introduced regularly, but ev'rybody at Big Missouri knows Tommy Bowlegs."

"The Indian?"

"To be sure. He's a Sioux vagabond who lives at an' around Big Missouri. Sleeps under the bushes an' in holes in the ground, an' steals fur a livin'. A decidedly int'restin' citizen."

"He gave me a warm welcome."

"It's his way," replied the stranger, with a dryly humorous air.

"I take it, my friend, that you live at Big Missouri."

"Yas, at times."

"I am on my way there."

"Ef you want ter arrive, look out fur Tommy Bowlegs."

"I will 'look out' for him, and, if I get a chance, repay him for his shot!" Hampton sharply replied.

"To be sure."

"Do you know a citizen of the town whose name is Walter McPherson?"

"Yas."

"I am going to see him."

The man on the bony horse suddenly evinced more interest.

"Land o' Goshen!" he exclaimed, "your name don't happen ter be Buck Hampton, does it?"

"That is precisely what my name is."

"Then I'm right glad I've met you. I've heard o' you—from Walt McPherson, too. He's a frien' o' mine, Walt is, an' I've been on more than one hunt with him over the prairies."

"And your name—what is it?"

"Yank Yellowbird."

Hampton quickly extended his hand.

"Let us know each other better. I, too, have heard of you. Walt's letters have been full of Yank Yellowbird. I am glad to have met you."

"I hope Walt ain't said nothin' not ter my credit; he's had a chance ter l'arn my weaknesses."

The speaker's eyes gleamed good-humoredly as he spoke, and Buck Hampton was more than ever impressed.

"He has said nothing but good of you, and an abundance of that. Besides, I've heard of you in other ways. The name of Yank Yellowbird is not new to the West. Men say he is a brave and skillful scout and mountaineer, a faithful friend and—"

"Leave it right thar, lad," requested the elder man, with a dry smile. "You might sp'ile it ef you went on, an' it's int'restin' ter my ear as 'tis. The Yellowbirds are all prone ter like flattery. My uncle Adam Yellowbird's wife, Eve, got inter a most egregious diffikilty at the Garden o' Eden through this weakness an' her passion fur expensive dresses—she would hev 'em all right from Paris—embarrassed my Uncle Adam financially an' otherwise, an' their farm passed inter the hands o' a man named Smith. I'm vain, myself, but I'm egregiously afflicted with new-rology, an' ev'ry time I git too worldly the new-rology gives my legs or arms, or muskels, a snap. I've had it so bad, stranger, that it would double my fingers up so quick they'd snap jest like a whip-lash."

"Walt has told me of your painful infirmity," returned Buck, gravely, though the friend he mentioned had also written him that Yank's

neuralgia existed only in the mountaineer's humorous fancy.

Yank stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment, and then suddenly raised his gaze again to Buck's face.

"By the way, hev you an enemy at Big Missouri?"

"I? No; I know no one there except McPherson."

"Odd, by hurley!"

"What is odd?"

"The more I think on it, the more I wonder why Tommy Bowlegs fired at you. He's a most egregious thief an' villain, but it ain't like him ter shoot a man for nothin', even ef plunder is behind it. Ef you had an enemy at town, I should say that he hired the vagabond to shoot ye."

"That seems impossible."

"We'll let it rest at that. So you're goin' ter Walt McPherson's weddin'?"

"Yes."

"It's ter be a big occasion."

"Do you know the bride-elect?"

"Zora Pike? I consait that I do."

Something in Yank's manner caused Hampton to look at him sharply. It was as though the mountaineer did not admire the lady in question.

"What sort of a girl is she?" the younger man asked.

"Harn'some—harn'some as a pictur'."

"I did not refer to her personal appearance. How do you like her?"

"Land o' Goshen! I don't dar' ter like her; b'ar in mind she's ter marry Walt. Oh! wal, she's a nice little woman, I consait, only odd. What more could you expeck in Pythagoras Pike's darter?"

"Pike is odd, I should say, judging by his scheme," Buck dryly observed.

"Mad as a March hare, by hurley! Who ever heard o' sech a scheme as his afore? His Majesty, the Duke o' Dakota, they call him hyar—sometimes, too, it's 'His Royal Majesty.' The man is off his base, so ter say. He's what they call a fellanthropist, a word which means 'crazy,' don't it?"

"Sometimes, I admit; but it is usually defined as one who so loves mankind that he is ready, and anxious, to help his fellow-creatures to the extent of his ability."

"Ye-e-es," replied Yank, with an indescribably dry, humorous prolongation of the word. "Wal, Pike is a'flicted that way, an' he's got it bad. His idee is a startler. He believes that Injun brains are ekul, or superior, ter white man's brains, an' that the noble red-man only wants a chance an' he'll gallop ter the front like a speedy hoss. So His Majesty has come ter Dakota, settled at Big Missouri, started ter build a tannery, collect sech Sioux Injuns as he kin coax in, an' actually perposes ter set 'em at work makin' leather out o' hides, like Christians. Land o' Goshen! did you ever hear sech a crazy idee?"

And Mr. Yellowbird chuckled with his usual quaint, dry, genial humor.

"I judge that you think his scheme will not succeed."

"Succeed! My good frien'," and here the mountaineer leveled his long forefinger at Buck, and shook it to emphasize his remarks, "ef them atrocious Injuns don't wind up by takin' the feelosopher's skulp, it'll surprise me."

"I have not seen Pike, but my opinion is the same as yours, though formed at a distance."

"We'll see the sek'ul near by. I am a wand'rin' critter, an' seldom stop long in one place, but I intend ter see the beginnin' an' end o' His Majesty's attempt ter make tanners out o' Sioux Injuns. I consait I shall not hev ter wait long."

"I should hardly suppose Pike could get those wild fellows to go to work."

"Most on 'em wouldn't, but he thinks he kin fill his tannery. I declare I'm sorry fur the man, fur thar is goin' ter be a most egregious row at Big Missouri one o' these days, an' skulps will be in danger. Injuns never was made ter be tanners; it ain't in the atrocious insex. Now, I know one Injun—a dumb Modoc named Trail-lifter—who is a man o' honor an' genius. He's b'en my companion on the trail an' by the camp-fire fur several moons. He's a good feller, is the Modoc, but when it comes ter work—Land o' Goshen! he's as wild as a hawk, an' could never settle down to it. No more will the Sioux, an' I hope Big Missouri won't see a massacre along o' Pike's scheme."

The mountaineer said the last words gravely, and stroked his beard in a perturbed way.

"In plain words, you fear an outbreak."

"Ef events foller the course o' Natur', it's likely ter come. I hope it won't."

"The Sioux are peaceable, just now."

"Like a sleepin' volcaner. You can't tell when they'll break out, an' it may come any time. Now, as a rule, the Yellowbirds are a heroic family, but I ain't parfict. I hev the misfortune ter hev a left foot which is a weak sister—in fact, a most egregious coward. The weak sister gits scared easy, an' is sharp at scentin' danger. It tells me now that trouble may happen at Big Missouri. I ain't sure but

the first act has took place. Tommy Bowlegs fired at you with intent ter kill, an' as all triberlations an' distresses must hev a beginnin', so that may be the starter in an Injun outbreak!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DUKE OF DAKOTA.

HAMPTON looked sharply at his companion.

"This matter seems to linger in your mind."

"It does," Yank admitted.

"Why?"

"It wa'n't like Tommy Bowlegs ter shoot at ye."

"He shot, nevertheless."

"To be sure."

"Do you think he had any particular motive?"

"That I don't know. I don't know why he should hev, sence you're a stranger hyar, but we may as wal bear in mind that he did shoot. I'll make it in my way ter investigate the red insex a bit."

During their conversation the two men had resumed their journey by mutual, though unspoken, consent. An hour's ride would take them to the town which rejoiced in the name of Big Missouri.

Buck Hampton was greatly interested in the information received in regard to the place. Yank had thrown stronger light upon several points only briefly noticed in McPherson's letters, and Buck began to see clearly.

Plainly, it was the opinion of nearly every one that Pythagoras Pike's scheme was wild and hazardous. There was evident derision in his *sobriquet*—"His Majesty, the Duke of Dakota." Hampton hoped that no harm would come to McPherson out of all this. The latter was to marry Pike's daughter. If trouble occurred with the Indians, his friends would be in it. Hampton was ill at ease.

Next to this matter, he was interested in Yank Yellowbird.

He had often heard of the man as a brave, hardy, honest borderer; a true friend; a man who loved quiet, peace and ease when such things were possible, but who could become a lion when he was aroused. At such times he was the terror of evil-doers and the bulwark of the deserving, in whose cause he never hesitated to work—if need be, to fight.

On this day Buck met him for the first time, and he observed with interest.

The mountaineer was a tall, bony man of an age which might be estimated at forty-five or more. He bore his age well in every respect, and was strong, hardy, quick and tireless.

His hair was of a flaxen color, and neither long nor short; his beard was light-colored, sparse and irregular; his nose long and large; and his gray eyes were small and unobtrusive. Observers would not call him a handsome man, but the more they observed him, the more he would grow in their favor—if they liked honest men.

His face was very honest in every way, and his wide mouth always had a contented, humorous expression when he was at ease. On occasion, however, it could close with iron firmness, for this rover of the West had plenty of resolution under his good-natured exterior; it showed in his square jaws, and the steady gaze of his gray eyes.

"And this," thought Buck Hampton, "is the celebrated Yank Yellowbird!"

A slight smile crossed the younger man's face as his gaze fell to Yank's garments. They were a world too big for the bony, genial mountaineer, but Buck's inclination to smile vanished in a moment as he noticed the unpretentious dignity with which they were worn.

Buck was ready to believe that Yank deserved his fame—and it was not for nothing that the Indians had given him the name of "Never-miss."

What Yank thought, Hampton did not know, but he had no reason to fear inspection. He was a man of twenty-five years; a trifle taller and heavier than men average; a strong, hardy, honest, gentlemanly young fellow; and his face, if not wholly regular of outline, was manly and bold.

Tommy Bowlegs, like his attempt to assassinate Hampton from the thicket, was almost wholly forgotten, but as they neared the town the second of its citizens dawned upon their vision and brought a slight frown to Yank's face.

"A determined-looking fellow," remarked Buck, as a swarthy, middle-aged man passed them, nodding shortly to the mountaineer.

"To be sure; too egregious determined, in some ways."

"I judge that you don't admire him."

"Not ter my knowledge," was the dry reply.

"That man was a feller I can't well recommend. He passes hyar as an honest man, but I consait it is because dictionaries are skeerce, or their eyesight is poor. Bart Lawless is his name, an' I must say it's a good fit. True, I don't know much on him, but I'd heard o' him afore we met at Big Missouri. 'The Basilisk,' is a playful name they give him. I'll say ter you what I said ter Walt—the wider you steer clear o' Black Hills Bart, the better 'twill be fur you."

Just then they reached the top of a slight rise of land, and the village lay before them.

Big Missouri was located where hill and prairie struggled for supremacy, with victory for neither. Both were represented. Down from the higher hills came the waters of Racer River. They "raced" past the village, affording excellent facilities for water-power, and then "raced" on to ultimately pour into the great Missouri River.

Hampton saw a wild, beautiful place, albeit one still young and small.

He was given only a brief survey, however, before Yank suddenly broke the silence:

"My frien', we're in luck, an' you kin have a look at the crazy man o' the town right away. Look! thar is His Majesty, an' His Majesty's darter."

He indicated two persons walking not far away, and then added:

"Come on, an' I'll interduce ye. As Walt McPherson's frien' you'll git a warm welcome, an' it would be so from Pike anyway; he ain't the least swelled with vanity, ef he is rich."

Even then Buck noticed that the mountaineer had no good word to say for Zora Pike. He made no answer, however, but rode on by the elder man's side.

Pythagoras Pike, the philanthropist, was before them.

He was, apparently, about sixty years of age. He was six feet tall and, having an abundance of bone, muscle and flesh, would weigh at least two hundred and forty pounds. The top of his head was bald, and nearly all his face was smoothly shaven; but under his chin, reaching from ear to ear, was a thick, tangled line of snow-white beard, and a similar line around the back of his head showed like a thick, obstinate white curtain for his neck. His round face was exceedingly red, smooth and shiny, and nearly always in a state of perspiration.

His garments were good, though not fashionable, with the exception of the tall, rusty hat which was perched on the back, rather than the top, of his head.

According to Hampton's estimate his eccentricity showed even in his personal appearance, and it did not seem strange that he had undertaken such a wild task as to civilize the Indians.

Yank introduced Buck in his peculiar way, and the young man was cordially welcomed. Zora evinced a somewhat stately air, but he was Walter McPherson's friend, and as such she made him welcome as warmly as he could wish.

"We are glad to see you, sir; very glad!" declared Pythagoras Pike. "Big Missouri has room for all who see fit to come."

"You have a very handsome town, Mr. Pike."

"Beauty amounts to nothing, sir. This world is practical; it should be above beauty."

"Yet we need not object to what Nature does for us."

"I don't know about that, sir. In my opinion we should be a good deal better off with less so-called beauty, whether it be that of Nature or art. Practical effort is the thing, sir; beauty is a humbug!"

Hampton was learning more about Mr. Pike. His manner, his words and his motions were emphatic, stubborn and dogmatic. Clearly, he was one not to be moved from his opinions, and intolerant of those of others.

"Practical effort is a good thing," replied Buck, dryly, as he remembered Pike's great enterprise.

"Certainly, sir. Now I am a practical man. No doubt you know that I am doing something for the unfortunate Indians?"

"I have heard of your effort, Mr. Pike."

"What do you think of it, sir?"

"It is a great undertaking."

"But practical, eh?"

Hampton knew that it would not do to dispute the man. For Walter McPherson's sake he replied:

"Eminently so."

"You are a man of sense. I hope you have no foolish prejudice against the Indians."

"None whatever."

"I am glad of it, sir. He who has is an ignoramus and a bigot. The Indians have been abused, sir. There is no reason why they should not be on a level with white men, and I am going to do what I can to put them there. Anon I will show you over the tannery I am building in this town. The work will be done inside of a month, and then I shall start the place with a force of men, of whom all save three or four will be Sioux Indians. The plan will be a success!"

His Majesty looked at Buck as though defying him to contradict this assertion.

"I hope so, Mr. Pike."

"I know it will!" His Majesty declared. "I, sir, am from the State of Rhode Island. I have lived in a civilized State, sir, and my money and sagacity have made me an eminently practical man. I see further than most men."

Once more he seemed to challenge Hampton to dispute him. Buck wished himself well away. Of all obstinate, hard-headed men, the Duke of Dakota seemed to be the worst.

"The world needs reformers," he answered, with a desperate desire to please the old gentleman.

"It has ME!" calmly replied Pythagoras Pike, tipping his rusty hat a little further back on his head.

"It is clear that you are in earnest."

"I am, sir; I always am. I am a practical man. I am going to show the world what Indians can do. They can work like other men, and I'll prove it, sir. My tannery will be a success. I have for foreman one David Kendall, an experienced man, and I shall be my own manager."

"A very good idea—"

"Of course, of course. My money is in the enterprise, and it is right that I should put in my brains, too," tapping his forehead with one fat finger.

"You will thus get all the credit."

"I shall, sir. I am glad to see that you agree fully with me, for all persons don't. There are a good many fools in this world."

His Majesty produced a red handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his red face.

"It is to be regretted that there are so many fools!" he added. "The world needs reforming. There is too much fol-de-rol on all sides of us; too much nonsense, and too little practical effort, sir. I am going to revolutionize the world, and the fools will be crowded to the rear."

"A desirable thing, Mr. Pike."

"Of course. It is a great wonder to me how many idiots, cranks, and well-meaning nobodies there are in the world, and I propose to have Big Missouri kept clear of them. I am going to run this town on practical principles, and the result will astonish folks!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLE.

NEVER in his life had Buck Hampton been more ill at ease. For Walter McPherson's sake he must keep on good terms with Pike, and the difficulties in the way of doing so were like mountains. He could clearly see that this headlong, obstinate old man would not allow any one else to have an opinion. He was stubborn, domineering and full of aggressive vanity.

To mix with this man and keep his good-will seemed an utter impossibility.

Yank Yellowbird did not once interrupt, but, though his bronzed face was unreadable, Buck saw those humorous gray eyes twinkle now and then, and knew that the mountaineer was inwardly laughing at his dilemma.

Several times Buck had glanced at Miss Zora Pike, but that young lady had not favored him with a view of her undeniably pretty face since her father began his harangue. She had turned her back upon him, and stood beating one slender foot upon the ground.

"The old gentleman's foibles are unpleasant to her," thought Hampton.

Fortunately "His Majesty" finally saw fit to bring his remarks to an end.

"We will all go back to the village now," he said, in an authoritative voice. "Mr. Hampton, I think Mr. Yellowbird will lead your horse. I will walk beside him, and let you and Zora go together. Since you are McPherson's friend, it is time that you made her acquaintance."

This arrangement pleased Buck, but he could not answer for the young lady. She kept her back turned until Pike and Yank had passed on, and when she did turn toward him, he experienced a feeling of disappointment.

In his opinion her manner was much like that of a sulky child.

"Can you be reconciled to my company, Mr. Hampton?" she asked.

"Reconciled! Why, I shall be pleased."

"People have a way of making me inferior to all others, you see. Now my father monopolized the conversation, and did not give me a chance to say a word."

"We have the field to ourselves now."

"True," was the pettish reply, "but I dare say some one else will want to be heard soon. I am always crowded to the rear."

Buck looked at her sharply.

"You should assert yourself, Miss Pike."

The young lady made a peevish gesture.

"I am not a child to be beaten down, and then gain my rights by sheer power of voice. Excuse me for inflicting my troubles upon you, but people will afflict me!"

Up to this time there had been a scowl on her forehead and a most disagreeable expression on her pretty face, but she banished it considerably as she spoke the last words. Buck was bewildered. Despite her assertion that she was not a child she was acting very much like one, and a particularly disagreeable child, too.

Hampton felt almost as helpless as when he was talking with her father. It is not desirable to have a stranger pour his, or her, woes into your ear, when you are bound to be all that is pleasant and agreeable to the complainant.

"I assure you that you have my sympathy in any trouble that you may have," Buck answered, remembering that this was McPherson's betrothed.

"Oh! never mind me; I expect to be slighted."

"I trust that I have not offended."

"Not as yet. There! that is ungracious, and if there is one thing I do aspire to be, it is to be just. I am always willing to confess my faults, and to do my share toward peace. Don't think me vain, Mr. Hampton, for I am not; but you are Walter's friend, and I like you!"

Having made this assertion she turned a bright, pretty, engaging face fully toward him. It was all that was pretty and charming. Buck's heart warmed toward her. He had been disappointed, but, in the sunshine of her amiable mood, was willing to believe that she had good cause for her late peevishness.

They walked on slowly, and Zora fairly sparkled. Let a woman be young, educated, refined, quick-witted, brilliant and pretty—pretty! what a world of power that implies!—and she can win her way to the heart of almost any man.

Buck began to admire Zora greatly.

Once more they came in sight of the village, having passed a depression in the prairie, and the first of the houses was then scarcely a hundred yards distant.

Almost the first thing that Buck saw was Yank Yellowbird and Mr. Pike. They stood by the brawling river, and His Majesty was delivering an oration while Yank listened, meekly holding the two horses.

Buck smiled, but at that moment there was a new voice to attract their attention, and in a moment more he was shaking hands with Walter McPherson.

Old friends that they were, there was a marked contrast between them. McPherson was twenty pounds lighter, and more delicately built, while his face expressed little of the strong will so easily read in Hampton's.

His was an honest, pleasing face, but hardly a strong one. Brave he might be physically, but it was not in him to be a moral hero.

Something of this was known to Hampton, but he had never seen his friend tested. Knowing him to be true, honest, and a devoted friend, it was not for him to look and see what the man might be when tried as he hoped he would never be.

Zora's sunny humor continued, and for awhile there was happiness all around. Buck and Walter were happy at meeting after a year's separation, and Zora seemed to enter fully into the spirit of the occasion.

"This is a most auspicious day for me," she declared, laughing. "Of course Walter has been my slave—that goes without saying—but now you are to be another. I will be a queen, and you two my subjects. Why not, since they call father 'His Majesty'? Why shouldn't I be a ruler? But I warn you I shall be a despotic one."

"You need only to command," gallantly replied Hampton, "and we will obey."

"Don't promise too much," she said, warningly.

"How can I do less? Am I not a loyal subject?"

"But I am a female tyrant."

"Walter likes your reign so well that he is preparing to go into life-long slavery; I think I can endure it for a few days."

"Well said," laughed McPherson.

"What a lucky queen I am!" cried Zora.

"Few persons could hope to have such subjects, reign where and when they might."

"There are few such queens—in fact none," affirmed Walter.

All this was interesting to them, and never had three hearts been lighter. McPherson looked at Buck with an expression which said: "Is not my affianced the most charming and beautiful of women?" and it was clear that he was very proud of her.

Just then Buck did not wonder at it—Zora Pike certainly was full of graces of appearance and manner.

Conversation continued in this light manner for several moments. Before it had time to grow more serious in a natural way, something occurred to change their mood—something which was like a black, ugly thunder-cloud sweeping across a fair sky.

Footsteps sounded, and a man appeared upon the scene, coming from the bushes to the north.

His hasty movements at once drew Buck's attention.

He saw a man who had certainly passed his fiftieth year; a tall, slender person, who was dressed in garments of good style and material but now hopelessly seedy, while here and there they had been neatly darned.

His long hair and beard, once very black, were now half-white, and his face was thin and pale. It was an intelligent face, and this, together with his garments, seemed to mark him as a gentleman in a state of misfortune and decay.

Just at that moment his face was not pleasing; it bore an angry scowl, and as he came straight toward them, Buck was dimly conscious that trouble was not far away.

The man advanced, and, stamping one foot angrily upon the ground, addressed Zora:

"It is you I want to see!" he declared, in a husky, angry voice. "How dared you misuse my child?"

The brightness had gone from Zora's face, and she did not look anywhere near as pretty as

before. She made a disdainful gesture, and turned her back upon the excited old man.

"You shall not escape me thus!" he added, raising his voice, and trembling with anger. "I am going to free my mind. You have insulted my girl, and I will have an answer."

"I have nothing to say," Zora peevishly replied.

"Well, I have, and you are going to hear me. You mustn't suppose that you can insult my Tillie. You are rich and grand, but she is every whit as good as you."

"Grimes, you will please say no more," put in McPherson, sharply.

"I shall say more, and nobody can help it. No doubt you think because I am only Jo Grimes that I have no right to speak. Sneer on—I don't care what you say about me, but no man or woman shall insult my child."

"We have nothing to do with Miss Grimes."

"I have something to do with this woman," and the old man made a gesture toward Zora. "Girl, you have basely wronged my Tillie. Her work for you was well done, and you know it, yet you refused to pay her what was due, and you insulted her."

Zora made a scornful gesture.

"I don't know how any one would go to work to insult such a person," she said, petulantly. "Such wretched creatures as you make all the trouble in the world."

"And what of you?" was the bitter retort.

"When I engage a working person to serve me, I am going to have my rights. My good nature has been imposed upon, and I have been put to the rear, but I will bear it no longer."

"The dress Tillie made for you was carefully done," Grimes asserted.

"It was slovenly done."

"I notice that you wear it."

"One has to wear something."

Buck Hampton, to whom this was an unpleasant scene, glanced at Miss Pike's dress. To his eyes, at least, it looked neat and becoming.

"It was simply your ill-humor," Grimes declared, intemperately. "You wanted to find fault, and you did it. I don't care so much for the loss of your custom, for if we can't live we can starve, but the rest I will not bear. You insulted my Tillie. You called her a low nobody, and twitted her with being 'crazy Jo Grimes's girl.' Woman, are you a fiend, to insult that poor child? At least, you are no lady—"

Walter McPherson stopped the intemperate speech. Making two long steps he grasped Grimes's arm fiercely.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Utter another word and I will take you in hand, you ruffian!"

CHAPTER IV.

"BEWARE THE BITE OF THE DOG."

GRIMES angrily shook off McPherson's hand. "Stand back!" he exclaimed. "How dare you lay hand upon a gentleman?"

"A gentleman never insults a lady—and you have done that," Walter retorted.

"One lady never insults another—and she has done that!"

Grimes pointed to Zora, and Walter's face flushed.

Buck Hampton found this scene painful, and considered it disgraceful. Who was right he did not know, but he had arrived at the conclusion that Jo Grimes was not in his right mind, fully, judging by his wild looks and manner, and he stepped forward to move toward an amicable settlement of the difficulty.

"Walter, allow me—"

"No!" McPherson interrupted. "I can deal with this crank alone. Grimes, get away from—"

"What did you call me?" shrilly cried Grimes, his face growing paler.

"I called you a crank."

The man drew his breath hissing; then suddenly drawing back his hand, struck McPherson a sharp blow across the cheek with the open palm. The blow stung painfully, and McPherson's temper ran away with him. Without pausing to think he struck Grimes in the breast, and as the old man reeled back his foot caught and he fell to the ground.

Walter's conscience smote him the moment that he saw what he had done, for he remembered that Grimes was an old man. He sprang forward to assist his adversary to rise, but Grimes spurned the proffered hand and slowly regained his feet alone.

Then all saw a few drops of blood upon his cheek. When he fell he had struck against a pointed stick, and a slight wound was the result.

The sight of the blood checked the apology, sincere and humble, which was on Walter's lips, and Grimes had the first word.

He wiped away the blood and looked at McPherson with glittering eyes. Buck Hampton would not have been surprised to see him draw a revolver and proceed to deadly hostilities, but he did nothing of the kind.

Looking at Walter in that strange, startling way, he spoke almost in a whisper:

"This was a vile blow, young man!"

"Mr. Grimes," cried McPherson, full of remorse and generous desire to undo all damage as far as he could, "I beg that you—"

"You are a young man, and I am old," went

on the man, huskily; "and you are a grand person, while I am only Old Jo Grimes. That explains it all. You regard me only as a dog, and you struck me down as though I had been a dog!"

Once more Walter tried to speak, but Grimes went on, his voice growing harder, more bitter, fiercer.

"Yes, yes, I am only a dog in your sight; but even a dog can defend himself, and there is sometimes venom in their bite. Beware the bite of the dog you have struck! You haven't seen the last of me, sir. I haven't the strength to strike you as you have struck me, but I will get even with you yet—you and that fiend of a girl! I swear by all that is sacred that I will be revenged upon you—I'll strike when you least expect it. This will prove the worst deed you ever did. I'll be revenged upon you, and I seal my vow thus!"

He had collected some of the flowing blood, and he now gave his hand a flirt. The red fluid flew through the air, and one drop struck upon the back of Walter's hand in a big vivid mark.

Old Jo Grimes laughed wildly.

"That's the first act!" he said, shrilly. "I'll let you rest for awhile, but I don't give away any blood without getting some in return. Beware the bite of the dog you have struck!"

Another moment and the speaker was striding away with long steps.

McPherson called after him still intent upon making humble apology, but Grimes did not so much as turn his head.

Zora shivered and moved nearer to Walter.

"I'm afraid!" she whispered.

"Nonsense!" replied her lover, trying to speak lightly. "That was nothing. Jo Grimes is crazy."

Zora looked at Buck Hampton, and his somber expression did not seem to reassure her.

"Mr. Hampton does not agree with you," she said.

"He don't know Grimes as I do."

"Who is he?" Buck abruptly asked.

"A half-crazy fellow who lives just beyond the village. He is not to be seriously regarded for a moment."

"He mentioned his daughter, I think."

"Tillie Grimes—yes. She supports him; she is a seamstress."

"I wish I had never seen her!" cried Zora, petulantly. "She is the cause of all this trouble. She worked for me, and the last work—this dress—was miserably done. In fact, she found out that I was too good-natured, and easy to put to the rear. She imposed upon me; that's all. We had trouble, and I told her never to come near me again. This last trouble was all her fault."

"My dear girl, don't think of it," urged Walter.

Zora shivered.

"I feel sure that I have cause. Did you hear how that man threatened you?"

"Rubbish! He will forget it before night."

"Still," said Hampton, "it would be well to take care of yourself."

"That crazy fellow is harmless."

"I hope so."

"But you think he is to be feared; I know that you do!" exclaimed Zora.

"He made plain threats, and at the present time his will is good to keep them. I hope he won't, but I should say there was mischief in the man. I speak thus plainly to urge you to be on your guard, Walt."

"Nonsense!"

McPherson laughed, but as he looked at the red stain upon the back of his hand, which he had succeeded in removing only imperfectly, he could not avoid a feeling of uneasiness.

Just then Pythagoras Pike and Yank Yellowbird approached.

"Those who see Big Missouri in its infancy may well be pleased," His Majesty was saying, "for in a few years the place will be so changed that no one would recognize it."

"To be sure," replied the mountaineer, a queer smile stealing over his face. "Thar is likely ter be an egregious amount o' changes."

"We aspire to beat Denver, sir," pompously asserted Pike.

"You've got the men ter do it—thar's a heap o' snap an' vim ter Sioux Injuns."

"You are a man of sense, Mr. Yellowbird, but, will you believe it? there are scoffers who assert that my scheme is utterly worthless. These persons are fools, who don't know what a practical man like me can do."

"I consait you'll tame the Injuns," observed Yank, slyly winking at Buck Hampton.

"Exactly, Mr. Yellowbird, exactly. Now, I desire you to be present at the grand festival I shall give as an opening, when the tannery is done. You have had some experience with Indians?"

"An artom," was the dry reply. "I s'pose I've shot about ten thousand."

His Majesty started back.

"What?" he cried.

"Oh! 'twas all in the way o' trade, an' without malice aforethought, or malice athrethought, either, fur that matter. Them that I shot never complained, an' I don't reckon they bore me any ill-will."

"Did you first try moral persuasion on the unfortunate men?" Pike asked, with some sternness.

"I consait I did."

"What arguments did you use?"

"Sometimes a good, stout switch, sometimes my ramrod, and then, ag'in, a boss-whip. An' I reckon that I usually quickened their consciences, too, by hurley! This case o' yours is on a different scale, however. They're your hired men."

"And fellow-creatures."

"To be sure."

"The result of my undertaking will silence croakers," declared His Majesty, with enthusiasm.

"I know one croaker liable ter git silenced," Yank said, in an undertone, to Buck.

"I begin to think every one here is mad," the young man replied.

Nevermiss chuckled, but at this point preparations were made to return to the village and he made no direct answer. Walter would have gone at once with Buck, but the latter suggested that he first go with Zora to her home, and come to him afterward.

This was decided upon, and thus Buck and Yank went on together. The former at once fell into thought, but aroused as he saw Yank's gaze fixed upon his face in an amused way.

"Why do you laugh, friend Nevermiss?" he asked.

"I was wond'rin' how you like your introduction ter this town an' its people."

"I suppose you refer to Mr. Pike."

"Mainly."

"He is a queer person."

"Rather."

"The man fits the idea which he has. I need not ask if you think he will succeed in bringing the Sioux down to work. He is the wildest of wild theorists, and, of course, will fail."

"Ef he don't lose his skulp he'll be a lucky man."

"The same idea is in my mind. I fear that Big Missouri will yet see warm times."

Yank pointed his forefinger at Buck and, waving it emphatically, slowly replied:

"I'll bet quite a trifle that the atrocious red insex burn the hull town to the ground inside six months."

"That would be a deplorable affair."

"To be sure, but deplorable affairs will happen. The Yellowbird fam'ly records is full on 'em. Nobody's pedigree can show more on 'em ef I do say it. An uncle o' mine had thirty-seven children, an' all but four growed up ter be old maids, while them four only escaped by dyin' doarin' their infancy. I reckon the thirty-three old maids envied 'em, fur they was always sighin' an' groanin', an' takin' on like hurley about this vale o' woe. They all claimed ter want ter die, but they didn't, an' I think 'twas lucky; fur with their weepin' and wailin' they'd made most egregious melancholy angels. I thank the good Lord that I was born o' a contented natur'. This world is good enough fur me. I've no fault ter find with it, though I hev suffered a good bit with newrology, an' hev a left foot that is an atrocious weak sister."

"Yank," said Hampton, seriously, "did you see the trouble between Walt and Grimes?"

"Trouble? No. I ketched a glimpse o' Grimes makin' off at double-quick. Was thar trouble?"

Buck gave a brief account of the quarrel, and the mountaineer began to caress his beard zealously. He made no comment, however, even when his companion told of the old man's threat.

"What do you think of it?" Buck added.

"That threat troubled me. Is Walt in danger?"

"It's hard to say, lad; hard ter say. Old Jo Grimes is sartainly off in the upper story a bit, an' thar is no knowin' what he may do. I consait it will be wal fur Walt ter be an artom car'ful. Yes, by hurley! he ought ter be car'ful. Ef he ain't, Grimes may yet do him mischief!"

CHAPTER V.

THE CRACK OF A RIFLE.

Two weeks have passed since the day when Buck Hampton came to Big Missouri.

It is evening, and all the town is in a state of excitement. An event is about to occur in which every citizen—even the temporary resident—has an active interest. On this evening, Providence willing, Walter McPherson and Zora Pike are to be united in marriage.

Pike's residence, the finest in town, is ablaze with light, and the more favored of the guests are already in and about the house, from whom arise happy bursts of laughter, as one after another perpetrates some good jest.

A most joyful occasion, truly.

His Majesty aspires to have a residence worthy of his grand estate. His house has been erected among some grand trees, and has been up long enough so that flowers and cultivated shrubs are all about.

The gardener's name is Isaac Brown.

Brown had been a busy man that evening, and when his work is all done he stands apart and looks with satisfaction at the lamps swaying

from the branches of trees, and the other things he has done to brighten the scene.

A step sounds near him, and he turns about. His face grows graver as he does so. He sees a man with a face so pale, haggard, stern and somber that it somehow dampens his spirits.

The man is Old Jo Grimes.

Brown knows him well, having seen him often. He is rather sorry to see Grimes present, but merely because he regards the man as one out of his head. He is vaguely aware that Tillie Grimes made Miss Pike's wedding dress a month before, but does not know of any trouble whatever with her, or with her father.

"So it's you, Grimes," he says, as cheerfully as he can with that somber face before him.

"Yes."

"Glad to see you at the wedding," continues Brown, telling the polite fiction readily.

"Where is Walter McPherson?"

"In the house, I reckon."

"Haven't you seen him lately?"

"He was on the piazza with Miss Zora a few minutes ago."

"Ah!"

The gardener thought Grimes's manner peculiar.

"Have you business with him?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to put it off to-night. You can't expect a man to stoop to business on his wedding-night, old man."

"The business which I have with McPherson," remarked Grimes, in a singular, emphatic manner, "can be done to-night better than at any other time."

"You ought to know."

"Consider for yourself, to-morrow, and see."

"Why not to-night?"

Grimes laughs shortly, harshly.

"Because you will see clearer to-morrow."

"My eyes are good now," retorts Brown, seeking to dispel with a joke a vague uneasiness which has fallen upon him—an uneasiness for which he cannot account.

"So are mine," Grimes adds, grimly. "Yes, I think my eyes are good enough so that I can transact the business I have with McPherson."

"Crazy as a March hare!" thinks Brown.

"Which room are they to be married in?" pursues Grimes.

"The north room."

"Is that the window to it?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Good-night!"

Grimes moves away, while Brown looks after him and shakes his head.

"A mighty queer guest to have at a wedding. The man is deranged, I believe, and to-night his eyes blaze like a wild creature's. I don't imagine McPherson will be pleased to see him. He will be a ghost at the banquet in a double sense. What's he doing now?"

Grimes had passed for a moment beside a tree. He secured something which Brown could only dimly see, and then moved on his way.

"What is it? It wasn't there a bit ago, and he must have brought it with him. Oh! I see—a cane, or staff. He must be getting feeble—no; he must be strong to carry a clublike that. It's nearly as long as he is tall."

Grimes disappears in the bushes, and then, as new duties present themselves, Brown forgets all about him for a time.

Half an hour later there was a bustle inside the house. The hour appointed for the wedding had arrived, and the ceremony began.

The first thing was an address from His Majesty, the Duke of Dakota. Pike could not have endured life without making that address. Ever ready to give his opinions, he felt called upon to be especially eloquent and dogmatic on this eventful occasion. The meek old minister looked at him beseechingly, feeling that he was the one who ought to make a speech, but His Majesty was quite of another opinion.

He began ponderously, and was soon making known his views on several subjects, none of which bore any relation to marriage, to Walter and Zora, or to any of the guests.

"He is a hull team," observed Yank Yellowbird, dryly, to Buck. "That chap could talk down a cyclone, an' palsy a blizzard."

"Monsieur is the soul of eloquence; monsieur is the best of men," unexpectedly answered another voice.

Nevermiss turned quickly. He saw a slender, dark-faced man, who had thick, curling black hair, a broad smile and very white teeth.

"Humph!" returned the mountaineer, "may I ask who be you that rec'mends him so wal?"

"My name is Le Bland; and the speaker bowed very profoundly.

"Think I've heerd on ye. You're Pike's cook, ain't ye?"

"I am thus employed by Monsieur Pike."

"Land o' Goshen! don't trouble yerself ter bow so low. I know it comes nat'ral ter a Frenchman—I see you're one—an' it's perlit, but it's dang'rous. Knowed a man once who bowed so often, ter be perlit, that he finally got a-goin' an' couldn't stop bowin'. He kep' it up fur years, like a rockin'-hoss, an' was exhibited fur perpet'al motion. Take warnin', Mister Cook."

Le Bland made a disdainful gesture.

"Your soul is among the gross things of earth," he retorted, and then beat a retreat.

"Gone back ter his pots an' kittles. Wal, let him go. Fur sech a perlit man he orter know it ain't style fur a hired man ter a'dress a weddin' guest so familiar, Buck."

"He has done wonders here to-night. He has had charge of the whole house, as well as of the coming supper."

"Then we'll forgive him, fur a good cook is a jewel, by hurley, but Jules seems ter be as tonguey as Pike. Land o' Goshen! hear Pike go on, will ye! He's powerfully given ter words."

"Mr. Pike has his peculiarities."

"He has, by hurley. He'd oughter be a lawyer. He reminds me o' one o' the legal per-feshion I knowed in Beaver-head City. The place was small, but it had a lawyer, an' finally another o' the same sort came, a chap named Pixley. His fu'st case was ter defend a man a'cused o' murder. It looked like a bad job, fur two other fellers saw him do the deed, but Pixley sot out ter clear him."

"He couldn't break down the evidence, an' when 'twas all in the sheriff went out ter buy a rope ter hang the pris'ner. Then he came back ter hear Pixley's speech. He heerd a good 'eal on't afore 'twas done. You may not b'lieve it, but when that feller got a-goin' he talked right on day arter day like a machine. He never took no sleep, an' he eat his grub stannin' up—an' a most amazin' appetite he had."

"At the cend o' the first week the jury sent him a note axin' him ter close, so they could go ter church. He paused an' looked at 'em."

"Will ye bring in a verdick o' Not Guilty?" sez he.

"We can't do it conscientious," sez the fore-man.

"Do it unconscientious, then," sez he.

"Our oaths won't allow us," sez the fore-man.

"Teaches ye better than ter swear," sez he.

"An' then he went on with the speech, an' a most powerful plea 'twas. They had ter send fur a new jedge, but the lawyer kep' right on. The members o' the jury was sick at times, an' had ter send fur their doctors, but barrin' the pullin' o' a couple o' teeth that lawyer never took sick. Sech a delivery was most amazin', an' folks came from fur an' nigh ter hear it. Railroads offered special rates ter excursions, an' a new volume o' his speech appeared reg'lar on the news-stands."

"I ree'ly s'pose," and here Yank's voice grew lower and more serious, "that the egregious critter would be on that argyment still, but most onfortinitly his client, who had gone inter the box in the prime o' life, died o' old age, an' one o' the best speeches ever made was thus cut down in its infancy, so ter speak. I hope Pike will be able ter finish."

His Majesty did finish. It would have been an audacious man who would have tried to stop him. With his own favorite assertions he talked on until he had said all that he deemed necessary.

Then he turned to the minister with a wave of his hand.

"You can now proceed," he condescendingly said.

There was a general sigh of relief. Nearly every one regarded Pythagoras Pike as a dismal bore, and their faces brightened at being temporarily rid of him.

The marriage ceremony would be a great relief.

There was a universal stir, and the minister, trying to recover his dignity, prepared for the great event.

Zora and Walter joined hands.

His Majesty's daughter was very pretty that night. Whatever her opinionated old father might be, she looked fit to be a queen. McPherson was proud of her. It did not occur to him just then that the neat, rich dress which became her so well was one cause of her quarrel with Tillie Grimes.

The Grimes nobodies were forgotten for awhile.

The minister cleared his throat. He opened his lips to begin the ceremony, and summoned up his most sonorous voice.

Yank Yellowbird winked to Buck, but the act was thrown away; all others were looking at the young couple.

And this is what they saw:

Suddenly Walter McPherson released Zora's hand, clapped his own hands to his side, and then, reeling, fell to the floor like a dead man. As he did so the crack of a rifle sounded not far from the house, though only a few of the astonished guests realized the fact.

Utter silence followed.

Every gaze was fixed upon McPherson.

At first he lay motionless, but, after a pause, he raised himself upon one elbow, the other hand being clasped over his side.

Then they saw that hand grow red with blood, and a great, shuddering gasp went up from the assembled guests. They realized the truth at last.

Walter McPherson, standing there to be married, had been shot down by an assassin!

CHAPTER VI.

WHO WAS THE ASSASSIN?

YANK YELLOWBIRD was the first person to stir to any purpose. He had been standing near the window through which he knew the fatal shot had come, and he gained it with a few quick steps and sprung out.

Then he dashed through the tall trees, his glance sweeping here and there in quest of the person who had fired the shot.

The grounds were so well lighted that he hoped to discover him at once.

Not a person was in sight. The guests had been packed in the house, and neither they nor an interloper met his gaze as he hurried on. He soon reached the fence; then he turned to one side and went on as before. Three or four other men soon joined him, and the search of the grounds was completed.

The assassin was not seen.

Yank went back to the house. He saw that Walter had been assisted to a sofa. He lived and was conscious, but Nevermiss, accustomed as he was to gunshot wounds, did not need to ask the doctor if the hurt was serious.

McPherson's injury was dangerous, to say the least.

Zora was beside him, doing what she could, and the women shuddered as they saw the red stains on the bridal garments. His Majesty was just recovering from a doze, and he now squared himself for a speech.

"My friends, a most foul deed has been done, but we must not suffer the unknown assassin—"

"He is not unknown!" interrupted Zora sharply.

Every gaze was turned upon her.

"Did you see him?" the doctor asked.

"No."

"Then how do you know who it was?"

"I know who threatened him, and so does Mr. Hampton."

Buck experienced a sudden feeling of regret. Somehow, the turn of affairs did not please him.

"Who was it?" the doctor continued.

"Jo Grimes!" Zora replied.

"Did he threaten McPherson?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

The blunt question confused Zora. For the first time she saw that an explanation must reveal her own share in their troubles, and she was vaguely conscious that the revelation would not enhance her reputation. She had been the cause of the quarrel, and this was the result.

"They had words," she finally replied.

"About what?"

"I don't know that I am obliged to answer."

"My daughter," said His Majesty, ponderously, "you should not hesitate in this emergency. Let human weakness be left to others; you should proceed practically, and enlighten us."

"Miss Pike says," observed the doctor, "that Mr. Hampton also heard Grimes threaten McPherson. Is such the fact, sir?"

"It is," returned Buck. "The men quarreled, a blow was given and returned, and Grimes threatened to be revenged. It hardly seems, though, that he would proceed to such an extremity."

The last words were hesitatingly said. Although it was his friend who had been shot down in such a cowardly way, he felt reluctant to believe Grimes guilty. Why this was so he hardly knew, but he remembered the air of melancholy dignity—the vague suggestions in the man's appearance that he was once more than a vagrant—and felt that he would rather see the assassin proven to be some one else.

At this point Walter rallied and spoke in a faint voice.

"It was Grimes who shot me," he whispered.

"Did you see him?" asked the practical doctor.

"No; but he swore to be revenged upon me, and said that he would strike when I least expected it."

"And he said that he never gave away blood without getting blood in return," added Zora.

"What did he mean by that?"

The girl grew confused again, and did not reply.

"I struck him," explained McPherson; "he fell and was wounded by a sharp stick. He shook a drop of the blood upon my hand, and swore to be revenged. He said, 'Beware the bite of the dog you have struck!'"

"This is conclusive!" affirmed Pythagoras Pike. "Here, Sheriff Littlewood, take a posse and go at once to Grimes's cabin. Arrest him and bring him here!"

Yank Yellowbird touched Hampton's arm.

"S'pose you'n I make two o' the party!" he quietly suggested.

Buck started.

"Agreed," he replied, promptly.

At this moment another man pushed to the front.

"I would like to say a word," he observed.

"Speak, Mr. Lawless: speak out."

It was Pythagoras Pike who answered, and he spoke heartily. Mr. Barton Lawless was a man whose good will he greatly desired, for the gentleman was not only intelligent but an experi-

enced borderer, with wide experience among the Indians.

"I don't think that Grimes did the deed," said Lawless, quietly.

"Ha! Why not?"

"First of all, I doubt if he has possessed a weapon since he came to Big Missouri."

"He might have borrowed one, or stolen one!" cried Zora, impatiently.

Mr. Lawless bowed very low.

"True, Miss Pike, true; your active mind at once grasps the points of the case. There is more to be said, however. Has any one seen Grimes here to-night?"

Nobody had.

"Exactly," continued Lawless. "Well, it is not likely that he would come here as a guest. The invitation, general though it was, would hardly cover a half-crazy man; and if Grimes had a spite against Walt, he would not come as a friend, anyhow."

"Nobody thinks that he came as a friend," the doctor interrupted.

"Well, suppose that he came as a foe. We have all been through the grounds, and we did not see him there. This is not proof that he was not there, for some assassin was near."

"Land o' Goshen, man!" interrupted Yank Yellowbird, "if you've got aught ter say, give it voice. We'll all die o' old age afore ye make yer p'int!"

"Mr. Yellowbird speaks wisely," agreed His Majesty. "Come to the point, Mr. Lawless."

"I will."

Calmly Lawless drew a torn, blackened bit of cloth from his pocket.

"The patch used with a bullet in a muzzle-loading rifle," he observed.

"Indubitably," coincided His Majesty.

"I found it on the lawn, as Mr. Kendall will testify, and near it I found something more. The print of a woman's feet!"

There was no longer a doubt to what Barton Lawless's remarks were tending. He spoke in a cool, matter-of-fact voice, as became an old borderer, but he was sowing the seeds of fire.

Zora's face paled and then flushed.

"I don't believe it!" she cried.

"The tracks are undoubtedly still there. Mr. Pike, only David Kendall and I have yet seen them—will you and some of the other gentlemen go out and investigate before they are trodden out of shape by other feet?"

There seemed to be general anxiety to do as he suggested. Out went nearly all the men, and Lawless led them straight to the place in question.

"Look!" he directed, pointing to the ground.

They obeyed. There, deeply imprinted in the soft soil, were two small marks, unmistakably made by a woman's shoes. There were few there but all saw that from the tree close at hand projected a limb which would make an excellent rest for a rifle.

The men looked and talked, and the tide of suspicion drifted away from Grimes somewhat. He could not have worn such shoes. The only thing which worried them now was to answer these questions:

If McPherson had been shot by a woman, who was she, and what had been her motive?

Buck Hampton noticed that Yank, who gave no opinion, stood by and stroked his beard with a very thoughtful expression on his face.

"What do you think, Nevermiss?" Buck asked.

"Things ain't always what they seem," the veteran dryly replied.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I ain't prepared ter say jest now. I prefer ter let them who are inclined ter be active run the machine fur a while, but Walt McPherson is a frien' o' mine, an' it's likely I shall hev a word ter say later."

"You have a suspicion?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Wait, lad, wait. Let the others hev their day, an' I'll look about later."

"I have a condition."

"What is it?"

"Let me share your investigations."

"Nothin' would please me more; you shall go erlong. You'll be an egregious help ter me ef the newrolgy should git ter crackin' my j'int, or my left foot git skinned."

By this time the party were ready to return to the house. Bart Lawless had converted some to his opinion, and the others were inclined to be silent. Pythagoras Pike looked puzzled and had little to say.

They went to the house and made their report, whereupon Walter McPherson again spoke.

"Nonsense!" he said, with unexpected strength in his voice. "Don't let yourself be led astray by any such wild opinion. It was Jo Grimes, and nobody else, who shot me. Go and arrest him!"

"We will," replied His Majesty, manifestly relieved. "Here, men, three of you follow me, and we will see to Grimes at once."

CHAPTER VII.

TILLIE GRIMES.

THREE men at once stepped forward as volunteers—Yank, Buck, and David Kendall, the lat-

ter being the prospective foreman of His Majesty's tannery.

Pike looked at the trio with satisfaction. He could not have asked for better companions. It was destined, however, that the affair should have an official hearing. The sheriff, Littlewood, who had been moving about the grounds, returned, and he became the nominal head.

The doctor gave a fresh and encouraging report of McPherson's condition, and they went away with less fear for him, but full of stern desire to be avenged upon his would-be assassin.

Old Joe Grimes's cabin was the most remote of all the village buildings. To a certain extent it had prevented building operations at that point. The man had been unpopular, his neighbors had been strong against him without any clear idea of their own reason, and he had been a creature shunned, and, in a measure, outlawed.

He was supposed to be desperately poor, and had never been known to make an effort to improve his worldly condition; the support of the household of two had been left to his daughter, Tillie.

There were some who pitied this girl, but, as is too often the case, pity was not a ruling passion. On the whole, she shared the aversion felt to her father, and was only noticed, or tolerated, by those who employed her as a seamstress.

Buck Hampton had never seen her, though she was well known to him by reputation, and as they walked over he fell to wondering what she would be like. He saw more in her father than the citizens of Big Missouri did—what of the girl?

The Grimes residence proved to be a log cabin. It was the only one of the kind in the village, and was said to be the oldest structure there.

A light showed through the curtained window and Sheriff Littlewood rapped at the door. There was a stir inside, and then the door opened.

Tillie Grimes stood revealed to view.

There was nothing in her appearance to recall her father. Unlike him she was very fair of complexion, her hair being of true golden color. She was, perhaps, a trifle above the medium height of her sex, and her form was all that grace and health could require.

If Buck Hampton had expected to see an ignorant, ill-looking, poorly-clad girl he was mistaken. Tillie Grimes had an intelligent face; she was very neatly, though plainly, dressed; and her face was beautiful. It seemed more fit for a palace than a cabin.

Sheriff Littlewood was not impressed by her beauty. He regarded her as no better than the dirt under his feet, and his manner was rude and overbearing as he spoke.

"Is your father in?"

"Yes."

The reply was calm and indifferent.

"We want him."

"He has retired."

"Oh! he has, eh?"

"Yes."

"Wake him up!"

"What business have you with him?"

The girl was as calm and indifferent as ever. If she had knowledge of a criminal act of her father's, her composure was remarkable. Buck Hampton believed that he understood her indifference; she knew how she was regarded in the village, but pride and common sense enabled her to meet their disdain without mental disturbance.

"Our business," replied Littlewood, rudely, "is with him, not with you. When did he come in?"

For one moment the girl's face wandered from the sheriff's face; it sought those of the other men. Perhaps she read danger there; her own face clouded.

"He has not been out to-night," she replied.

"What?"

"He has not been out."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Then he has been here with you?"

"Yes, until ten minutes ago, when he retired."

"I don't believe you!" Littlewood rudely exclaimed.

Her fair face flushed slightly; that was the only sign of emotion she showed.

"Young woman," said Pythagoras Pike, ponderously, "I beg that you will not criminally compromise yourself. A dastardly outrage has been committed to-night, and we have reason to think that your father may have been concerned in it—"

"When did it occur?"

"An hour ago."

"Father has not left this cabin to-night, nor has he left my sight."

The assertion was firm—Hampton believed that he could trace a shade of defiance in it.

His Majesty looked at Littlewood in an uncertain way, but the sheriff did not feel at a loss.

"Your lie won't save him, young woman. I am here to arrest him for shooting Walter McPherson, and I am going to do it!"

Tillie Grimes had recoiled. For the first time

she showed signs of emotion, and it was almost overwhelming. She became very pale, and put out her hand to grasp the edge of the door as though she was dizzy.

She stared at the sheriff in dumb dismay.

"Come," added that person; "get out of the way, will ye? Heroics won't answer here!"

Yank Yellowbird's broad hand fell upon the sheriff's shoulder.

"My gentle frien'," said the mountaineer, steadily, "b'ar in mind that this young gal is a gal, and that she isn't a'cused o' nothin'."

"Who said she was?" retorted Littlewood.

"I judged from your manner that you forgot it. Now, it's a most egregious mean thing ter hev a poor mem'ry; it is, by hurley, fur it sometimes gits a feller into an atrocious fix. A word ter the wise is sufficient—arrest Jo Grimes ef you want ter, but don't abuse the gal. I'm awfully afflicted with newrolgy, an' my left foot is a weak sister, but the glory o' the Yellowbird pedigree won't allow me ter see a woman misused."

The sheriff stared at Yank in blank amazement.

He could not understand how any one could speak in favor of such a wretched creature as one of the Grimes family, but the word had been spoken, and he dared not brave the tall mountaineer.

"You must remember who this girl is," he said, half-apologetically, half-sullenly.

"I don't keer a jot who she is," returned Yank, with mild warmth. "Don't you forget that she's a woman. Go ahead an' do yer business, but you needn't git up such an egregious disturbance. One gal won't hurt ye when you hev four men at yer back."

Littlewood flushed, while His Majesty waved one hand deprecatingly.

"Really, Mr. Yellowbird, I must protest—"

Tillie Grimes stepped quickly back.

"Why don't you come in if you want to?" she asked, somewhat curtly.

"To be sure," added Nervermiss. "Walk in, Littleground, and don't be diffident. Your modesty will git ye inter an atrocious triberlation, some day."

Outwardly there was a good deal of geniality in the mountaineer's voice, but Hampton knew very well that his sympathies had in a measure gone over to Tillie.

It was a part of the veteran's creed to sympathize with the helpless and unfortunate, wherever he found them, and unless he knew them to be vicious, he was to be counted as their friend.

The party entered the cabin.

It consisted of two rooms on the lower floor and a loft above. It was furnished with rigorous plainness, but was scrupulously clean.

"Where is your father?" the sheriff asked, more gently than before.

"In the other room."

Tillie pointed as she spoke, and they entered the room. Grimes lay in bed, apparently fast asleep, but when Littlewood shook him by the arm he awoke.

"You're wanted," said the sheriff, tersely.

"Wanted? Who wants me?"

Grimes looked at them with unwavering eyes, but his voice was sharp and peevish.

"Well, I reckon I do," the sheriff replied, bluntly.

"You want me? Why?"

"For murder."

"Murder!"

Jo Grimes echoed the word quickly, and then sat up in bed. If he was guilty he carried himself well, for he did not show any fear. He glanced from face to face, and then curtly demanded:

"What insolent jest is this?"

"You won't find it any jest, I reckon. You are my prisoner; I arrest you for the murder, or attempted murder, of Walter McPherson!"

A look of joy flashed over Grimes's face.

"Is McPherson shot?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Thank Heaven!"

The old man uttered the words fervently.

"No doubt you thank Heaven—or the other place—but don't forget that the law has you in its grasp."

"Am I accused of the deed?"

"Yes."

"Whoever makes the charge is a liar!" fiercely cried the prisoner.

"Be calm, father!" interrupted Tillie's even voice. "They cannot connect you with the crime. I have already told them that you have not left this house, nor my sight, to-night. I will swear it in any court. Whatever has happened to McPherson, my father is innocent."

At that moment footsteps sounded in the outer room.

"Wait a moment, gents," said a new voice. "I have a word to say in regard to Jo Grimes, and I reckon it will prove important."

The speaker was Isaac Brown, His Majesty's gardener.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE NET TIGHTENS.

THE sheriff and his party looked at the gardener with interest.

Do you mean, Brown, that you can throw light upon the distressing tragedy which has occurred?" asked Mr. Pike.

"I reckon so, sir."

"What do you know?"

"I saw Jo Grimes in the grounds near your house, sir, and—"

"Saw him there when?" interrupted Littlewood.

"Perhaps two hours ago."

"What! this evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Why, certainly; I talked with him."

Littlewood turned his gaze upon Tillie.

"I thought you said that your father had not left this house since dark, young woman."

Tillie did not reply, but her expression was one of dismay. What she might have said was not to be known; His Majesty took up the conversation.

"Brown, did you speak with Grimes near at hand?"

"I might have touched him while we talked."

"Was your conversation important?"

"Important! Well, I should say so! He spoke of Mr. McPherson, and his manner was very significant."

"How so?"

"He asked several questions about McPherson, and said that he had business to transact with him—business which could not wait."

Buck Hampton looked only at Jo Grimes and his daughter. The former looked cold and disdainful, while Tillie's expression was one of alarm. She could not but see that her father was in a net, and it was clear that she was devoted to him.

"My man," put in Pike, "recall in a clear and practical manner all that was said between you two."

"Well, sir, he asked right at the start where McPherson was, and then said that he had business with him. I told him he would have to postpone it until to-morrow, and he answered that his business would not wait; that it could never be so well done as on this night."

"Very significant!" observed Littlewood.

"Proceed, Brown," directed His Majesty.

"He said that I would realize this fact to-morrow."

"He did, eh?" cried Littlewood.

"Yes."

"That decides it; he was hinting at the crime which he intended to do."

"Proceed, Brown!" ordered Mr. Pike.

"He asked me which room they were to be married in, and if a certain window where we could see a light was one of the windows to that room. It was through that window that McPherson was shot."

"The evidence grows overwhelming," said the sheriff. "What more was there, Brown?"

The gardener hesitated and looked at Grimes. "I don't know that I ought to mention it," he then slowly replied.

"It is your duty to tell all that you know."

"Well, sir, after Grimes left me he walked away some yards until he reached a tree; then he took up something that had been leaning against it. I thought then that the thing was a long, heavy staff, but in the light of recent developments I am afraid that it was—"

The speaker came to a full pause and seemed very reluctant to add what was in his mind.

"Well, well, Brown, what do you think it was?" demanded His Majesty.

"I didn't say I knew, but that it might be a—"

"Well, a what?"

And Brown almost in a whisper:

"A rifle!"

There was a moment of utter silence. Every one realized how terribly this evidence bore against Jo Grimes, and the closing statement seemed to place him in the net almost beyond hope.

The pause was broken by a wild cry from Tillie.

"It is false! it is false!" she exclaimed. "My poor father is incapable of such a deed; he would harm no one. He does not own a rifle, and has not fired one in years. It was a mistake on this gentleman's part—a terrible mistake!"

"Let it be borne in mind that Grimes swore to be revenged upon McPherson for the blow he received," said Littlewood. "He shook a drop of blood upon Walt's hand, and declared that he never gave blood without getting the same thing in return. He kept his threat."

"It is false!" cried Tillie, wringing her hands in despair.

"Did it ever occur to any one yet," asked Yank Yellowbird, in a steady voice, "that every man has a right to speak in his own defense? I consait that Grimes may hev a word to say. Speak out, mister, an' explain away these charges of you kin."

Grimes had been sitting with his face buried in his hands, silent and, it seemed, overwhelmed.

Tillie went to his side and placed her arms around his neck.

"Father," she said, in a tender voice, "I know the honor and purity of your nature too

well to doubt you. Tell these men that you are innocent!"

He lifted his head, and a bitter smile passed over his thin face.

"Is the mad dog allowed to speak for himself?" he asked.

"He should hev the privilege, ef he ain't got it," responded Yank. "I've lived long enough in this world ter become aweer that fair play is a jewel o' some price. I say ev'ry man, rich or poor, white or black, should hev a show. I object ter pernouncin' this man guilty afore he's tried. Jo Grimes desearves jestic as much as any other man, an' by hurley he's goin' ter hev it!"

And the mountaineer brought the breech of his rifle down upon the floor with a resounding thump.

"Beware, Yellowbird!" cautioned the sheriff.

"Bewar' o' what?—o' whom?"

"See to it you don't tangle yourself up with the law."

"Mister," replied Nevermiss, leveling his forefinger at Littlewood, "you may mean wal, but you kin shoot the widest o' the target o' any man I ever seen—you kin, by hurley! A sheriff ought ter hev some dignity, but you ain't got enough ter last a sick coyote while he's stealin' over-ripe meat. You've bullied Grimes an' this little woman, an' now you try it on me!"

The speaker's voice was low and even, but the sheriff remembered that he was said to be one of the greatest of fighting men when aroused. That swaying finger seemed to have a voice of its own, and Littlewood fell into a panic.

"I didn't mean—"

But Yank did not heed him.

"I'm a man o' peace nat'rally; I've got a left foot that's a weak sister, an' I'm egregiously afflicted with newrolgy; but the honor o' the Yellowbird record won't allow me ter be trod on too much. My fam'ly pedigree don't show no thin-blooded members that are willin' ter be trod on by atrocious insex, an' the cowards ain't goin' ter begin now. Ef you try ter ride over me, mister, I shall feel it my duty ter thrash ye like hurley!"

"My dear Mr. Yellowbird," cried the sheriff, "I assure you I never thought of speaking harshly to you."

"He knows," remarked Buck Hampton, who, remembering that McPherson was his friend, had tried in vain to control his indignation, "that you would thrash him as you would a snake, while Miss Grimes is a woman."

"I've knowed men ter git thrashed fur abusin' women," Yank added, stroking his beard.

"Very properly, too."

"Mr. Hampton," said Pike, severely, "am I to understand that you take your stand in favor of these people, and against Walter McPherson?"

"I take my stand for justice," Hampton replied, promptly. "I disapprove of the way this affair is being conducted; especially do I disapprove of Littlewood's coarse, bullying ways. Walter McPherson is my friend, and I stand by him in all things right; but even if there is reason to arrest Grimes, there is no reason why he and this young lady should be used so harshly."

"True as Gospel, by hurley!" Nevermiss added, smiting the barrel of his rifle with his open hand.

Every one there was surprised to find Jo Grimes and his daughter could find any one to speak in their favor; and no one was more surprised than the persons in question.

Tears filled Tillie's eyes, while Grimes moved quickly forward and gave a hand each to Buck and Yank.

"Gentlemen," he said, in an unsteady voice, "I thank you a thousand times for these kind words. For myself I care but little, for I am a wretched creature cast into this town like a wreck thrown upon the shore of the sea; but my daughter—my Tillie—"

He paused, trembled, and lost his voice.

"To be sure, to be sure!" exclaimed Yank. "We onnerstan' fully. It's clear as clear can be, an' not clear either, but sorter hopeful an' affectin'. I don't jest know what I mean by that, myself, but I consait it'll appear presently. Anyhow, you ain't goin' ter be misused fur what ye ain't d'ne. Now go along with Littlejohn, peaceable."

Grimes looked at Tillie.

"Don't fear fur her," the mountaineer added. "I'll take car' o' her."

Grimes wrung the speaker's hand.

"Heaven bless you!" he exclaimed.

"Sartain, mister, sartain."

"I'm an innocent man, sir."

"I'm glad on't."

"I am friendless—"

"No, ye ain't; I'm yer frien', an' I'll be yer percutin' attorney, too; an' I'll persecute the opposition egregious."

"All I ask is that you'll care for Tillie."

"No," interrupted the girl; "do not think of me. Give all your attention to my father, who is accused of a crime of which he is wholly innocent."

"We needn't argue the pint; I'll try ter see jestic done ter all. The idee I want ter set up is that o' fair play, an' everybody is goin' ter hev it—they be, by hurley!"

And the mountaineer again thumped his rifle upon the floor once more.

"Far be it from me," added Pike, "to deny justice to any one. As you say, Mr. Yellowbird, we have no right to persecute this young woman. She, at least, is not accused of any crime. I pledge my word, Grimes, that your daughter shall be well used; I will be her friend."

His Majesty spoke heartily. Under his superficial arrogance and vanity was a good heart, and he realized, at last, that Tillie Grimes had some claim upon them.

They were strong men; she, a girl deprived of her only friend and parent.

Littlewood abated his violence when he saw how his superior stood, and the outlook brightened so much that Grimes looked relieved.

"I am ready to go with you, if you insist upon arresting me," he said. "I am, however, innocent of any harm that has befallen McPherson."

Nobody answered. The testimony of Isaac Brown placed Grimes in a bad light, and it would have been a very sanguine person who, judging with partiality, would have given the opinion that Grimes was innocent.

CHAPTER IX.

A DILEMMA.

GRIMES had grown perfectly calm, and he asked Pike to take him away and end the scene. The pitiful way in which he glanced at Tillie explained why he advised haste.

Tillie went to Yank's side and spoke in a low voice.

"Will you and the other gentleman remain a little while and give me a chance to speak with you?"

She indicated Buck Hampton as she spoke.

"To be sure," Nevermiss answered. "Don't be cast down, little woman; we are goin' ter see justice done ef the world hangs tergether. Ef it don't, thar is a Judge who don't make no mistakes. Be o' good cheer!"

The words went to the girl's heart. Honor and sympathetic kindness beamed in every feature of the veteran's plain, whimsical face, and she could have put her arms around his neck and embraced him for his earnest defense of her father.

Grimes was soon ready. He made the parting as matter-of-fact as possible, and Buck knew that his mind was more normal than was usually supposed, but to the attentive gaze deep anxiety and anguish were very perceptible.

It was not for himself. He might be guilty or innocent, but he loved Tillie with all his heart, and he knew how she would mourn when he was gone. She would be all alone.

He kissed her, and then turned his gaze upon Yank.

"Remember!" he said, in a tremulous voice.

"I will. Don't hev a fear; I'll remember."

And then Grimes went out with Pike, Littlewood and Kendall.

Yank and Buck were left with Tillie. Hampton felt the delicacy of his position. He and Walter McPherson were old friends. That evening McPherson had been shot down by a cowardly assassin, and wounded, perhaps to death. Suspicion had pointed strongly at a certain man, but when others accused him, he—Hampton, the particular friend of the wounded man—had raised his voice in behalf of the accused, and was now arrayed as one of the defenders of the supposed assassin's daughter.

What would the world say of him?

What would McPherson say?

Hampton was troubled, but the same cause which had first led him to speak now made him firm in his purpose.

He believed in justice to all, and Tillie Grimes was a friendless girl.

"Now, little woman," began Yank, cheerfully, "we hev the field to ourselves."

"Yes."

Tillie spoke with evident agitation, and did not look at either of her companions.

"Whatever you see fit ter consult us about, we will turn our joodicial minds to it."

"You are very kind."

A pause followed. Tillie twisted her handkerchief nervously, and did not seem inclined to speak. Buck and Yank exchanged significant glances.

"I've had a heap o' joodicial experience in my day," pursued Yank, beaming upon the young people in his most liberal way. "I consait that few men hev hed more experience with the law than the Yellowbirds hev. As persecutors, defenders, plaintives, an' witnesses, they hev been at it pooty stiddy sence my uncle, Adam Yellowbird, lost the Garden o' Eden in a lawsuit with an egregious scamp named Ponderous Pilate. Mebbe you've heerd on him, Buck?"

"Yes, Nevermiss."

"I've always said 'twas consarned mean in Pilate ter foreclose his mortgage on Adam, an' I say so now. I don't care who hears me, neither!"

Yank smote his knee, and looked around as though in search of a person rash enough to dispute him.

"I was once apprenticed ter a lawyer," he resumed, after a pause. "He held sev'ral joodicial offices, an' was a big fish in the pond. The fu'st work he sot me ter do was ter make out the

papers in the cases o' two pris'ners. One was a hoss-thief, who was jest sentenced fur twenty year, an' t'other was a vagrant, who got thirty days.

"I filled out the papers, an' all went wal, on-til the next day. Then inter the office come my employer, lookin' sorter spotted, white an' red, all over the bridge o' his nose, a sure sign he was r'iled erbout suthin'.

"You dastardly villain!" sez he, shakin' his fist at me.

"What's up?" sez I.

"You've ruined me," sez he.

"I ain't te'ched the cash," sez I.

"My repertation is gone," sez he.

"Shall I fill out a s'arch-warrant?" sez I.

"Hang you an' yer fillin' out," sez he; "you've done too much on't already. You scoundrel," sez he, in a roar, "when you took up the hoss-thief an' the vagrant, you got 'em mixed. You give the hoss-thief one month, while the vagrant gits twenty year!"

"That's egregious hard on the vagrant," sez I.

"It's hard on me," sez he, yankin' out a harmful o' his hair; "my reputation is gone, an' I'm a lost man. All my feller-bein's despise me now."

"I consait the hoss-thief don't bear ye no ill-will," sez I.

"Oh, you scoundrel!" sez he, an' with that he bove the ink-bottle at my head.

"I seen that the argyment was liable ter lead ter hard feelin's, an' I sailed out o' the door, while he flung the rest o' the loose furnitoor at me. I consait I went pooty quick, fur when I come ter a step I found that the office ruler an' two law books had lodged on the skirts o' my coat.

"I had an idee he was a bit prejudiced ag'in' me, so I sent in my resignation the next day an' left fur the adj'inin' State. I heerd afterwards that the hoss-thief come out at the eend o' thirty days an' stole the lawyer's fast trotter. What become o' the vagrant I dunno, but he orter thanked me fur gittin' him a good home."

Yank told this alleged reminiscence without his usual show of interest. He spoke only to give Tillie a chance to recover her self-possession, but toward the end he began to wonder if he had done wisely.

He ceased speaking, and, as she did not follow him, Buck Hampton finally remarked:

"We are here to aid you, Miss Grimes, but I will frankly say that there is work for us to do elsewhere. Let us, therefore, come to the point at once."

Tillie started and looked earnestly at the speaker.

"One thing you can depend upon," she answered; "my father is innocent."

"I should be glad to know the real assassin, and see Mr. Grimes cleared."

"Believe me, sir, I am very grateful."

"Have you any theory?"

"As to what?"

"The identity of the assassin."

"Unfortunately, I have not."

"Can you prove your father's innocence?"

Tillie hesitated.

"Isaac Brown swears that he saw him on Mr. Pike's ground," Buck added.

"Yes."

The girl made the brief reply uneasily. Perhaps she, like Buck and Yank, was thinking how vainly she had declared that Grimes had not left the house during the evening.

"Do you doubt Brown's statement?" Buck pursued.

"I don't know how that was," Tillie replied, with manifest evasion.

"Can you suggest anything for us to do in behalf of your father?"

"I can think of nothing now."

"I hope, Miss Grimes, that you don't doubt our sincerity," Buck added, a trace of annoyance in his tone.

"No, no! Don't think that of me!" was her quick reply. "You spoke kindly to me when I needed a friend sorely, and I shall never forget it. I owe you a great debt of gratitude."

"That is all right, but in order to help Mr. Grimes we must resort to determined action. The man who was wounded is my best friend—God forbid that I should do anything to protect his assassin from justice. I have spoken for Joseph Grimes because I found it hard to believe him guilty, but I must have good evidence in order to stand by him. People will blame me for raising a hand in his favor, anyhow; I must have something to which to pin my faith in his innocence, and I remained here hoping that you could supply the needed assurance."

Hampton spoke gently and kindly, but he tried to open Tillie's eyes. She was not making good his hopes, and he saw before him the terrible possibility that he had actually arrayed himself in favor of Walter McPherson's would-be assassin.

Tillie looked confused and distressed.

"I only wish that I could do so, but—at present—I can only assert that my father is incapable of such a deed, and that—he is innocent. Will you not give me a little time to think?"

"Is it necessary?"

"Yes."

"Then we can only agree."

"To-morrow I shall be able to talk with you. I am very, very anxious to retain your friendship. I haven't a friend in Big Missouri, and if you will—"

She faltered, and lost all power to finish.

"We'll stan' by ye like brothers," asserted Yank Yellowbird, "but ef we are ter help Jo Grimes, of course we must hev all the light we kin. But we're on your side anyhow."

Buck looked at the mountaineer with a slight show of annoyance. His sympathy for Grimes, aroused by Littlewood's roughness, was already chilled by cold facts.

Was there one hope that Grimes was innocent? Just then Hampton could see no such chance.

Yank continued to speak, and with marked delicacy and skill tried to induce Tillie to speak plainly. The result annoyed and vexed Buck; she said nothing of importance, and he began to believe that she knew, or suspected, her father to be guilty.

CHAPTER X.

THE DIVER.

YANK YELLOWBIRD arose and suggested to Buck that they take their departure. It was clear that Tillie would not speak out—if, indeed, she had anything to say—and the sooner they went the better.

The parting showed each of the trio in a different mood. Yank, genial as ever, assured Tillie that she could rely upon their aid and sympathy; she was grateful, but, Buck thought, glad to have them go; while he could not help being somewhat cold and curt.

Stern facts are hard things to combat, and he was very much afraid that he had made a great mistake.

The two men went away. For some time nothing was said, but Yank spoke at last.

"Wal, lad, what do you make of it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid we have made a serious blunder."

"How so?"

"Walter McPherson is our friend, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, we have become the friends, apologists and defenders of his alleged assassin—and I must say that the evidence is strong against Grimes. He was almost mad with rage the day of the quarrel; he swore to be revenged upon Walt; and nothing could be more impressive than the scene when, shaking a drop of his own blood upon Walt's hand, he said, 'I don't give away any blood without getting some in return. Beware the bite of the dog you have struck!'"

"I allow it looks bad, but that ain't proof."

"It is strong circumstantial evidence, when combined with what Brown told."

"To be sure."

"What will Walt think of us when he hears that we are champions of his alleged assassin?"

Yank came to a pause, and, leveling his long forefinger at his companion, slowly asked:

"What would he think on us ef we let an innocent man be hanged fur him? What would he think on us ef we showed up the real shooter? Thar are two mathematikel problems fur you ter 'rassle with."

"Nothing would please me more than to make all plain, Nevermiss. Don't think me a weak fool, but I am greatly disappointed with the Grimes girl."

"She didn't fulfil yer hopes, eh?"

"She did not."

"D'ye know why?"

"No."

"She was afraid."

"Of what?—of whom?"

"Of us. She didn't tell all she knew. When we stayed behind it was in her mind ter tell us suthin'; but once the time come, she rec'lected we was frien's o' Walt, an' she was afeerd ter trust us. Poor gall! I pitied her. Scorned an' trod on by all Big Missouri, she had l'arned the wu'st side o' the world so wal that her trust in mankind was gone. It's a melancholy thing ter see a woman that way—it is, by hurley!"

The mountaineer stretched out one long arm toward the town and added:

"Thar live them who has made the child suffer fur the parient—who has trod on Tillie 'cause her father is a leetle onsettled in his brain-pan—an' I say that they're atrocious mean insex!"

And the veteran thumped his rifle upon the ground as though he had one of the "insects" there, and wished to crush him beneath the heavy breech.

"You have put a new idea in my head, Yank. It is more than likely that the Grimes girl was keeping something back."

"I consait so."

"But what proof have we that it was not something against, rather than in favor of, her father?"

"First reason, that little woman has got a face I like—I do, by hurley. She's pooty as a pictur', too. Ef I wa'n't a venerable old man, a'flicted with a cowardly foot an' an egregious case o' newrolgy I consait I should fall in love with her. The Yellowbird pedigreen shows the hull fam'ly to hev b'en suscepterble ter female

loveliness—an' they showed their good sense, too."

"We wander from the subject, friend Nevermiss."

"Not much, we don't; we're drivin' at it straight as a die. Allow me ter ask what you think o' Mister Bart Lawless?"

The sudden question caused Buck to start slightly.

"What of him?" he asked.

"To be sure; what o' the Black Hills Basilisk?"

"I am not pleased with Lawless, but I fail to comprehend what you mean."

"He says a woman shot Walt."

"He intimated as much, and showed corroborative evidence."

"Footprints, bullet-patches an' the like."

"Yes."

"Eggregious funny, wa'n't it?"

"Speak plainly, Yank."

"I will. I can't answer fur the tracks, more than ter say they was sartainly made by women's shoes—whether a woman was in 'em, when made, is a p'int I can't answer fur—but one thing I will declar' on: that bullet-patch didn't lay on the ground when I went skimmerin' through the grounds jest arter the shootin' was done!"

Buck grew more deeply interested.

"Are you sure?"

"To be sure."

"What are we to infer from this fact?"

"That the torn, blacked rag was put thar sev'ral minutes arter Walt was shot by some one who had an object in view."

"You perplex me."

"I'm an artom perplexed myself."

"Could it have been Bart Lawless?"

"They say the hider kin find."

"But what could have been his object?"

"Now you hev me cornered; I can't tell, at present. One thing I hev diskivered, hows'ever; Bart Lawless may be in love with Zora Pike."

"No!" exclaimed Buck, freshly surprised.

"Ef he ain't, signs don't go fur much; I read the man, though he tried ter be innercent-like. I've told you what he is afore. In Big Missouri he stan's all right, but thar are places he'd not keer ter enter only it was night, an' most eggregious dark at that. Now, he found the bullet-patch which was put thar ter give false evidence. What d'ye make o' that?"

"He may have dropped it where he found it."

"To be sure."

"Furthermore, the insinuation that a woman fired the shot would, of course, have a tendency to hurt Walt with Miss Pike."

"I consait so."

"We now arrive at the question, Did Lawless know who fired the shot?"

"Now we strike deep water."

"I see, however, why you made a move in favor of Grimes. Suspecting Lawless as you did, you wanted good proof against Grimes before believing him guilty."

"Jes' so."

"Lawless, however, did not fire the shot. He was in the room at the moment Walt fell."

"That's a fack. I don't claim he did fire it, but it won't be lost time ter look after the Basilisk a bit. I reckon the grounds might 'a' told a tale o' their own, only all the crowd trooped over the lawn an' trod out the other footprints afore I could do any trailin'. That chance was lost. To-morrer, at break o' day, we will scout around Pike's house an' look fur a trail. Ef we don't find any, we must wait an' watch."

"If Lawless deliberately tried to deceive us all, to-night, will not his future movements be a clew for us? If he persists in his scheme, and it is wholly such—bogus and nothing more—will he not betray himself?"

"The p'int is wal made, but ef he's sharp—an' I consait he is—he will drop all else when he finds the evidence so strong ag'in' Grimes."

"And let an innocent man suffer?"

"Land o' Goshen! that won't trouble Lawless."

"Yank, what about Tommy Bowlegs? He tried a shot at me as I came to Big Missouri—may it not be that he looked over a rifle-barrel to-night?"

"I've thought o' that."

"With what result?"

"The atrocious insex is worth lookin' arter. He is low, mean, treacherous an' dangerous, is Tommy Bowlegs; an' he may hev been in this case."

"We must look to him."

"To be sure."

Conversation continued for some minutes longer, but Buck obtained no new light. He finally ended the interview by saying remorsefully that he must neglect Walter McPherson no longer; so he and Yank separated and each went his way. Buck's course was back toward the Duke of Dakota's house, so lately a place of gayety; now one of gloom and suffering.

He had to pass the half-finished building where His Majesty hoped one day to have Sioux Indians laboring like matter-of-fact white men. Some great men have monuments erected to mark their great deeds. That of Pythagoras Pike was this grim building. What would be left of it when his scheme was consummated,

instead of in an embryotic stage, was yet to be seen.

Buck looked curiously as he passed.

As he did so he caught sight of a dark object at one unfinished end. Was it a man? It had that appearance, but he had never heard of a watchman being employed.

He took a step toward the building, and as he did so the dark object suddenly stirred into life.

It wheeled, receded with a few quick steps, and disappeared at a bound. A splash followed from the river below.

Buck hurried to the bank. There was some light, and he half-expected to see a man swimming away, but everything was calm and quiet.

"Queer!" muttered the young man. "Who was this fellow who grew so startled that he plunged into the water like a fish? It was an unusual way of retreat."

Not considering the matter of sufficient importance to require him to cross the river, he turned back after waiting in vain for further manifestations. As he did so he saw a package lying near where the unknown had stood.

CHAPTER XI.

A SARCASTIC WOMAN.

THE package might be something left by the workmen, as Hampton was well aware, but the fact that it lay just where the unknown had stood before he made his dive into the river led Buck to approach it.

Picking it up he found a small package covered with coarse brown paper. He hesitated, was of two minds, smiled at the thought of investigating a trivial matter, but ended by breaking the string and looking within.

He found one thing only.

This was a pair of woman's shoes.

It was an odd affair to come upon such a thing. Women had figured but little in the history of the building—how had the shoes come there? Even in the dark he could tell that they were not greatly worn. What woman of remote Big Missouri could afford to throw them away?

Suddenly he remembered something more.

After the shooting of Walter McPherson the imprint of women's shoes had been found in the grounds outside the Duke of Dakota's house. According to one theory they were those of the assassin, but Yank had made a dry remark which indicated that he was not sure that any woman had been in the shoes when the tracks were made.

The discovery of these shoes impressed Buck considerably, and he soon came to a conclusion. "Nevermiss shall see them," he thought, and then he rolled up the shoes again and started for the house.

At times he felt inclined to smile at the idea of securing such things, and he was not long in deciding that no one but Yank should see them.

The mountaineer should decide whether they were of value.

When Buck reached the house all the guests were gone, and McPherson had been isolated in a chamber. He was much better than was to be expected, but the doctor had put two chosen watchers with him, and ordered that no one else should be admitted on any condition.

Such being the case Buck retired and, despite the late exciting scenes, managed to get a good night's rest. Arising in the morning he went down stairs and found Mr. Pike alone.

He was cordially greeted by His Majesty, who gave the good news that McPherson was apparently quite comfortable. Early as it was, the doctor had already called and was with the patient. When he came down there would, no doubt, be a chance to see the wounded man.

"I must say," added Pike, "that I am delighted at the prospect. Setting aside the fact that I like Walter, it would be a dampener on my plans if he had been assassinated outright."

"No doubt," Buck dryly replied.

"My whole heart is bound up in my business scheme, and when the tannery is done I want a reception that will dazzle all who are present."

"Naturally."

"It will be a novelty to the Indians."

"Decidedly, I should say."

"I shall take particular pains to make them feel that they are the equals of any person present. As you know, sir, I hold that an Indian is a man and a gentleman."

"I remember."

"Sir, has an Indian no soul?"

"All men are supposed to have. Right or wrong, they are on a level in that respect."

"True, sir. Well, the red-men will glow like the sun at my reception—my grand opening. Then I'll make him a practical workman. There's no nonsense about me, sir; I am a practical man, and I am bound to worst the fools who oppose me. I am only sorry there are so many fools in the world."

His Majesty was fairly started upon an oration, but the coming of the doctor fortunately saved Buck from it.

The doctor brought good news. McPherson was in a condition far more favorable than was to be expected. He had sustained no nervous shock of importance, and, unless blood-poison-

ing occurred, was likely to be about again very soon.

"I suppose I can see him now," said Buck.

"Certainly, only don't go in suddenly. Send your name and let him know you are coming."

The doctor went away, and Buck "sent his name" at once. The answer came back from McPherson: "Wait until after breakfast!"

Buck accepted the verdict and ate with Pike. Zora did not appear; it was understood that she was with her lover, and His Majesty, for one, was glad that it was so. He had taken a deep fancy to Buck, and here was a chance to talk to him on the pet scheme. Pike improved it, and gave a long oration without a new idea in it. Stubborn and opinionated as ever, he enlarged upon the alleged practical value of his great scheme, and gave a glowing picture of the day when the whole Sioux nation would be as civilized and industrious as a Massachusetts mill-hand.

Breakfast was over at last, and Buck left the room. Zora met him at the door with a readiness which suggested that she had been on the watch.

"Good-morning," he said, pleasantly. "Have you just come from Walt?"

"Yes."

"I will go to him and act as your relief-watcher."

"I have a message from him."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Zora had moved into the parlor while they were speaking, and in order to address her, Buck had followed. She now sat down.

"Walt don't care to see you," she replied.

"What?" he cried, in surprise.

She repeated what she had said before.

"Isn't he so well?"

"He is doing nicely."

"Then why don't he care to see me?"

"He thinks you had better go to Tillie Grimes!"

There was an amount of concentrated sarcasm, bitterness and insolence in these words which would be hard to describe. Buck flushed without any clear idea why he did so.

"Why do you say this, Miss Pike?" he asked.

"I have merely repeated his message."

Buck had his opinion of this, but reserved it for a later time.

"What have I to do with Tillie Grimes?" he asked.

"I judge that you have a good deal to do with her. You resisted the sheriff when he tried to arrest Jo Grimes, and you and Yank Yellowbird set yourself up as that girl's defenders."

"Who has told you all this?"

"It is common talk."

"Common talk is often the babbling of idiots. Does Walter McPherson know me so little that he indorses these sentiments?"

"We know you by your deeds," replied Miss Pike, tossing her head.

"Walt has known me for years; he never found fault with me until to-day."

"Perhaps he has only just found you out."

"You have a particular genius for sarcasm, I see, Miss Pike. However, I decline to accept you as Walt's spokesman. If you will have the truth, what you have said were *your* sentiments, not his."

"Sir?"

"You have forced me to speak plainly, Miss Pike."

"Yes," cried Zora, a red spot showing in each fair cheek. "I should say that you *have* spoken plainly. More than that, you have spoken brutally. I perceive, sir, that it is as usual—I am chosen as the chief object of your venom. Because I am good-natured I am trod upon and put to the rear. You ought to be proud, sir!"

Twice Buck tried to interrupt this outburst, but Zora was very angry, and she went on rapidly, viciously, almost hysterically.

Forcing himself to show an outward calmness he did not feel, he now replied:

"Let me explain, Miss Pike—"

"I don't care to hear your explanation."

"Miss Pike, Walt has been my friend for years. Before I allow him to wrong me, I must ask for mutual explanations, and if you appear as his substitute, I must insist upon your bearing me. If you don't, I shall go to Walt's room!"

Buck spoke in a resolute voice, and she saw that he was not to be thwarted. She peevishly answered:

"Well, I will hear you."

"Do you mean to say that Walt has refused to see me?"

"Yes."

"He blames me for my course last night, does he?"

"Pray, how could he do otherwise?"

"Who has taken the trouble to pour all this into his ears?"

"What he has heard is common talk?"

"His room is not filled with a mob of gossipers; only a few persons have been there. Who told him?"

Buck's manner was as straightforward as that of a lawyer questioning a witness in a courtroom, and Zora flushed perceptibly.

"Oh! I see the drift of your inquiries. You think I told him; you want to put all the blame upon my shoulders. As usual, chivalrous man selects me as the object of his venom."

"And you don't deny the insinuation. Well, Miss Pike, your father heard what I said at Grimes's house. He does not blame me."

"That is no argument."

"I am glad to have that point settled!" ironically returned Hampton. "However, I want you to ask Mr. Pike why I spoke for those people. It was simply because Littlewood was unnecessarily rude and harsh."

"Murderers deserve no mercy."

"Is Miss Grimes a murderer?"

"I will leave you to say; no doubt you know her history well by this time."

"Be that as it may, I am not disposed to waste any more time upon you," coolly replied Hampton. "Your petty sarcasm is utterly pointless, and your charges are unjust. When you come to your senses we will finish this conversation."

And Buck bowed haughtily and walked from the room without another word.

CHAPTER XII.

TRAIL-LIFTER.

THE Duke of Dakota was still sitting in the breakfast-room when Buck returned.

"Mr. Pike," said the young man, abruptly, "I interfered last night to prevent the sheriff from being unnecessarily harsh with a girl. Do you see any great crime in that?"

"Crime! Certainly not," was the surprised reply.

"Do you see any good reason why Walt should be offended, and refuse to see me now?"

"Bless me, no! Surely, he don't refuse, does he?"

"So I am informed. Will you do me a favor, sir?"

"By all means."

His Majesty spoke heartily. There was no one who could listen to his pet hobbies in a better way than Buck Hampton, and for that reason he liked the man.

"I desire you to go to Walt, see if he really knows what he is talking about, and, if he is firm in his determination to be offended at me, show him that I have never wavered in my loyalty."

"I will, Mr. Hampton."

"Say to him, if you please, that I have never forgotten that he is my friend, and that Grimes seems to be the guilty party; but that I see no reason why the Grimes girl, whom no one accuses, should be harshly used."

"It shall be done. You did right to check Littlewood, last night, and I'll uphold you."

The Duke of Dakota spoke heartily. He arose and went to McPherson at once, while Buck sat down to await his return. He had a presentiment, however, that no good would come of the visit.

In every point of the attack upon him he saw Zora's influence and sentiments. Ever since he met her he had wondered at McPherson's fancy for her. She was pretty-looking, and she could be all that was charming when she saw fit, but her nature was warped and unpleasant.

Her viciousness had now come to the surface fully, and, feeling sure that Walt had weakly yielded to her, Buck bore her no good-will.

Pike was absent half an hour. When he returned his expression was far from cheerful.

"Well?" questioned Hampton.

"Sir," replied His Majesty, "if McPherson was not a bed-ridden man, it would give me great pleasure to box his ears."

"You failed, then?"

"I did."

"I expected it."

"McPherson showed a vein of obstinacy which disgusted me. I'll say frankly that I hate an obstinate man, and Walt disgusted me. Explain all I might, and did, I couldn't smooth down his feathers. He is dead set against you."

"He is foolish," Buck calmly commented.

"Confoundedly so!"

"Did he send a message?"

"Well, ye-es—"

"Don't hesitate, Mr. Pike. Speak out!"

"He said, 'Tell Buck to go where his sympathies are—to Tillie Grimes!'"

Hampton smiled sarcastically. He had a nature which would make him as true as steel to any one whom he had honored with his friendship, and, being cool and moderate, he was ready to do all that he could to heal any quarrel; but he had enough self-respect so that when friendly overtures had been contemptuously rejected, he would not worry over the matter in the least.

"Perhaps Walt's mind will heal with his body," he replied.

"I trust that you will bear no ill will?"

"I am not so unjust as to do that toward a sick man."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir, for I want you at my grand opening. You've had experience with Indians, eh?"

"To a moderate degree, yes."

"I shall want you to take an active part."

"I'll certainly be here."

"Good! I tell you, sir, that night will mark

an era in the history of the nation. When other men see the despised Indian working peacefully at a trade, they'll take water. The fools of the land must go down, sir—go down like ten-pins. I'll bowl 'em over!"

His Majesty smiled at his joke, for it was something he seldom indulged in.

"I am a practical man, sir," he added, "and I am going to shame the obstinate theorists who oppose me. I hate theorists, fools and obstinacy!"

"Very commendable in you. Well, Mr. Pike, I have business elsewhere for a short time, so I'll leave you now."

He went, and as he crossed the threshold he mentally vowed never to go back there as a guest until Walt and Zora had righted the wrong they had done him. Just then he did not care greatly whether they ever did so.

He went at once to the point where he was to meet Yank Yellowbird. The mountaineer was already there, but he was not alone.

A young Indian was with him; a man at whom Buck looked with interest. He did not seem to be more than twenty-one years of age, but his lithe, slender form was a marvel of grace and strength. A sculptor might well have chosen him for a model. His features were singularly regular for one of his race, and his expression intelligent. But his most striking visible point was seen in his eyes. They were large, dark, bold and keen, and they had a way of flashing in a wild manner, telling of an untamed spirit in his dusky bosom.

"Mornin' lad, mornin'," said Nevermiss, in his most genial way. "Glad ter see ye. I consait you remember me speakin' o' a pardner o' mine, Trail-Lifter, the Modoc. This is him. Still Tongue, I call him, 'cause he can't speak a blessed word, bein' dumb from birth; but I reckon you can't find a squarer man, red or white, in Dakota."

Buck and the Modoc shook hands, the former said kind words, and then the young Indian's fingers began to work over and about each other in a mute language wholly unintelligible to Buck. Yank watched the swift movements of the fingers, and then nodded approvingly.

"To be sure. Buck, the Modoc says he's glad ter meet ye, fur you hev the fact an' form o' a warrior. He seldom says that fur any one."

"I am sincerely grateful."

"Still Tongue ain't got the gift o' speech, but he's got eyes in his head the best on us might envy, by hurley. He's a remarkable chap. Many a mile him an' me has rode together; many the trail we've follered in comp'ny; many the atrocious insex we hev outwitted. He ain't got his pedigree writ down like you an' me, Buck, but my Uncle Samson, the strong man who pulled down the wigwam an' crushed the Saracens and Jews, he tol' in his memories erbout a race o' people who was gifted far beyond the common, an' second only ter the Yellowbirds. It strikes me that Trail-Lifter may be one o' them, and o' princely blood."

Yank looked at his friend with kindly eyes, but the Modoc remained impassive.

"No doubt he is all you say," Buck replied.

"To be sure. Well, he's byar, and he'll keep me comp'ny fur a bit. Any news?"

"Yes. I have suffered for last night's work."

"How?"

"I'm cast off by Walt and Zora Pike."

Yank looked very much surprised.

"What fur?"

"An act of justice."

Buck then told all that had happened, while Yank fell to caressing his beard in the old way. The speaker's frankness in regard to Zora, and her supposed influence over Walter, led the mountaineer to be equally frank at the end of the story.

"I can't say that I'm very much s'prised, fur, between you 'n' me, neither on 'em is built o' the stoutest timber. Walt means wal, but he's easy influenced. As fur Zora, she means wal, but she's jest as obstinat as Pythagoras Pike himself, an' he is apt ter make things egregious on-pleasant fur all parties. What're ye goin' ter do about it?"

"Give them time to recover their senses," coolly replied Hampton.

"An' leave 'em alone, eh?"

"Yes. I trust that I am not weak enough to run after them, and beseech them to forgive me. Walt I can forgive, in a measure, for he's on a sick bed; but Miss Pike's waspish venom may wear itself out against the rock of time. I am not a target."

"Good! Your sound sense is refreshin', by hurley!"

"In the meanwhile, Nevermiss, we will look into the case more closely. If Jo Grimes is innocent, we will prove it. See here!"

He extended a package suddenly, and as the wrapping-paper fell aside, a pair of women's shoes were revealed.

"Hullo!" quoth Yank, "got a love-token from some fair maiden, ain't ye? Wal, now, that's sorter int'restin'. Member distinctly when I's courtin' a gal with freckles on her nose. When I parted from her she made me a present o' the same kind. I didn't stop ter pick 'em up, though, fur she'd hove 'em inter the

small o' my back so enthusiastically that she splintered the lumbar region, an' nigh about perdoosed a fractur' o' the stifle-j'int. Besides, I seen the stove-lifter sailin' my way, an' she was jest raisin' a dipper o' hot water, an' I reelly didn't know ter what a p'int the warmth o' her love might go; so I tuk ter my heels so she needn't see my emotion, an' run like hurley. Mebbe these shoes hev a hist'ry?"

Nevermiss looked sharply at his companion.

"They have," Buck replied, "and it occurs to me that they may fit certain tracks of which we know."

"My ears are open."

Buck told how he had found the shoes, whereupon Yank stroked his beard more rapidly than usual. The story of the man who had dove into the river like a gigantic fish interested him.

"We'll go ter Pike's premises at once," he decided. "We kin do it unseen. Come along, Trail Lifter. I consait thar are few eyes sharper'n yourn, an' somethin' may come on't. Ef these shoes fit the tracks, we shall hev a neat egregious myst'ry ter 'rassle with—we shall, by hurley!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS SHOES.

THE trio reached the spot where the footprints and the bullet-patch had been found. Despite Bart Lawless's argument that McPherson had been shot by a woman, no effort had been made to preserve the footprints, or to secure an impression of them.

It was chance, and that alone, that had left them in good condition.

Yank Yellowbird knelt down and carefully fitted the shoes into the tracks. The result fully justified all Buck's expectations; they fitted exactly.

When this had been settled Yank arose.

"Have you a theory?" Buck quietly asked.

"I consait that I hold the sho-leather that made them tracks."

"Well, how did they get to Pike's tannery?"

Nevermiss shook his head.

"I tol' ye that ef they fitted, we should be hard aground on an egregious myst'ry, an' we be. How did they come nigh Pike's buildin'? Wal, ef any woman shot Walt, she may hev thought it proodent ter git the shoes out o' sight."

"Theory first. Next!"

"Next, ef, as I once hinted, thar was no woman in the shoes when they made these tracks, thar was the same motive fur gettin' rid on 'em. I consait the man went ter the tannery, or, more properly, the river, ter git 'em out o' sight, but when you come along he got skeered, forgot the shoes, an' jumped in hisself. We hev admitted that Bart Lawless might be engineerin' some atrocious scheme, but this wa'n't him. The Black Hills Basilisk is no coward, nor apt ter lose his head. He wouldn't jump inter the river an' leave the shoes."

"I should say not."

"But somebody did."

"If we admit that the man I saw had brought these shoes there, yes."

"We may as wal admit it. Shoes ain't common, or cheap, enough so that folks kin afford ter leave 'em 'round like dead leaves—specially, not shoes as new as these."

"True."

"Hev you obsarved these shoes partic'lar?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Ef you hev you must 'a' seen that they are uncommon stylish fur Big Missouri. Most o' the gals here hev good big, gin'rous-sized feet, an' they jest put 'em inter shoes ter fit, plain at that, an' go their way. Tenyrate, sech is the result o' my observation. Now look at these shoes! Long, narrer an' most egregious funny shaped. Got a heel like a ramrod, by hurley! An' then see the holler in front o' the heel. No human bein' ever had sech a foot as that, but I consait it's style. Some women hanker fur style, an' foller it regardless. My Uncle Adam's wife, Eve, did, when they was on their garden-sass farm."

"I think you have a theory in regard to these shoes," observed Buck, quietly.

"I don't b'lieve but a blessed few o' the young women o' Big Missouri wear sech wasp-waisted shoes as them. They look as though they'd had an atrocious attack o' newrolgy in the stum-mick—they do, by hurley."

Buck looked steadily at the mountaineer.

"Zora Pike wears a shoe much like that," he remarked, significantly.

"I consait so."

"Can these be hers?"

"Jest the idee that is in my mind, lad."

"Suppose you go and ask her."

"Skeercely. My left foot is a coward, an' I'm sure the weak sister would jerk me back ef I tried ter go forruds, knowin' as I do that Zora is on the war-path. I hev a better idee. Who's that trim maid she has fur a body-guard?"

"Her personal attendant is named Nella Bryce."

"She's the one I want ter see. First, bows- ever, let Still Tongue an' me look fur signs 'round byar. Arter all the trampin' done by

others 'tain't likely we'll find a sign, but we may. Injun, come on!"

The young Modoc had stood like a statue during this conversation. Beyond looking attentively at the shoes he had betrayed no interest in the matter, but Yank Yellowbird, at least, knew that he heard all and was giving undivided attention. Trail-Lifter was a stoic, but he was as keen as a bloodhound on the scent.

Buck Hampton had no mean knowledge of border-craft, but, knowing that he could not compare with these men, he stood still and let them work alone. He watched with absent-minded curiosity, as it might be termed. He saw what they did, and admired their systematic care, though his thoughts were not always with them.

It was this divided attention which enabled another man to approach unseen by him. Something at last caused him to turn suddenly, and he found himself facing Bart Lawless, the Basilisk.

Lawless smiled and nodded.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hampton."

"Good-morning, sir."

Buck spoke somewhat stiffly. He remembered Yank's suspicions in regard to this individual, and was not glad to see him.

"Yellowbird is at it, I see," continued Lawless.

"At what?"

"Gathering clews."

Hampton did not answer.

"May I ask from what theory they work?" continued Lawless.

"You will have to ask Yank."

"Beyond doubt, Grimes is guilty."

"Oh! have you changed your opinion?"

"Yes."

"What becomes of the woman you selected last night as the would-be assassin?"

"A myth," Lawless coolly replied. "I am always ready to admit that I am wrong when convinced of the fact. The woman theory is weak; the evidence against Grimes is conclusive; and the presence of the footprints is easily explained. When the lawn has been so much trodden by the fair ladies of Big Missouri, it is not strange that footprints should be here."

"I am glad to have the matter settled."

Buck spoke with ill-concealed sarcasm, for he did not like Bart Lawless, but the latter remained as cool as ever.

"Of course I can't be blind to what every one else can see plainly," he said.

"Hardly."

Lawless glanced at the package in Buck's hand, but the paper concealed the shoes.

"Evidence?" he asked.

"No."

Buck did not hesitate to deceive the questioner, toward whom he felt an increased antipathy at each word he heard.

By this time it began to dawn upon Lawless that he was not being cordially received, and with a careless remark he sauntered away and joined Yank. Buck was not afraid that he would be more successful in that quarter.

Naturally he fell to wondering what had caused the sudden change in the Basilisk's expressed views. He had fully adopted Yank's theory that Lawless was working in an underhanded way. If, as the mountaineer suspected, he, also, aspired to win Zora Pike, his primary object was plain, but everything else was clouded in darkness. Bart Lawless, however, was a marked man with Buck. He had not fired the shot, for he had been in the room when it was done, but he might be knowing to the deed.

Pursuing their search the trailers disappeared from view, and for a few minutes Buck was alone.

Then some one else appeared.

Coming from the entrance to the grounds a girl was approaching the house. It was Nella Bryce, the girl mentioned by Yank a little while before, and Zora Pike's maid. Plainly, she must pass near him—he would accost her.

She was a small, neat, quick-motioned young woman. Her face was intelligent and unusually firm and determined for one of her sex. She was a servant in the Pike household, but, as Buck had before seen, she was far from being oppressed with a feeling of inferiority. She was pert and free, and she nodded airily as she approached Buck.

He greeted her cordially and made a remark which caused her to pause. He followed it up with others of a trivial nature, and then suddenly unrolled his package.

"Miss Bryce, did you ever see these shoes before?" he asked, abruptly.

The result of his course surprised him.

The girl recoiled, and a startled expression appeared in her eyes. He even believed that she changed color. She stared at the shoes and said nothing.

"I see that you recognize them," he added, quietly.

"I never saw them before," she replied, quickly, but her voice was not as pert as before.

"Then why are you so agitated?"

"Agitated! I am not."

She gave her head a toss, and tried to appear like her old, airy self, but it was not a success.

"I am pretty sure that you are mistaken in regard to the shoes. Look at them again. Are they yours?"

"Certainly not."

She extended a trim foot, which was certainly perceptibly smaller than the shoes Buck held.

"They must be Miss Pike's."

"They are not," she asserted.

"You know hers as well as your own?"

"Yes."

"And you say these are not hers?"

The girl's gaze fell before Buck's fixed regard. This, or his questioning, evidently discomposed her.

"I think they are not."

"You think? But you just said that you knew hers as well as your own. You must know whether these are her property. How is it?"

For a moment Nella's face was a study. She looked confused and dismayed—perhaps alarmed. Then she suddenly rallied and made a desperate effort to appear natural.

"What nonsense you talk!" she cried, airily. "I never knew you were such a joker before. Just as though you could be interested in a pair of old, worn-out shoes. I never thought your judgment was so poor that you would try to weave a romance about such common things. Ha! ha! Why, it's terrible nonsense, Mr. Hampton! But I can't stay here; I have work to attend to, so I'll leave you now—"

"But what of the shoes?"

"I will take them."

Nella's face brightened, but Buck, who had laid a trap deliberately, smiled dryly.

"Why should you, if they are neither yours nor Miss Pike's?"

Her face fell, then she rallied again and retorted:

"Keep them, if you wish, I don't want 'em. You ought to have a pair of stockings, with holes in the heels, to go with them!"

With this pert retort she hurried away, nor did Buck try to stop her. He smiled grimly.

"I may have been precipitate in speaking to her, but I have established the fact that she knows more than she has told. Considering that she is a remarkably plucky woman, this is very significant. To get the emotion any ordinary woman would have shown we must double Nella's. Do this and we arrive at the conclusion that she was dismayed and frightened to an extreme. Strange! There may be more in the theory of a woman assassin than any one has believed. At any rate, these shoes now become a feature in the case, unless I am greatly mistaken, and if we can learn the truth a startling state of affairs may be revealed!"

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE EVIDENCE.

YANK YELLOWBIRD and Trail-Lifter soon returned. They had found absolutely nothing of interest, but it was a result expected by the mountaineer. Black Hills Bart had hung around while they searched, and then, getting only meager civility from Yank, had gone away.

Buck explained what had happened, and Nevermiss listened attentively to the story of Nella Bryce's interview with Hampton. The latter, however, waited in vain for him to speak when the end was reached, and Buck was obliged to resort to a question.

"What do you make of it, mountaineer?"

"Much—nothin'!" was the reply.

"Explain!"

"I make out that thar is somethin' in it, but, by hurley, I don't see clear."

"Do you suspect the Bryce gal?"

"I consait I do. She's got an idee in her head, but what is it? We're gittin' on egregious ticklish ground. Reminds me o' my school days. I never went ter school much, but a schoolmaster—they called him a peddlegog thar, though why I dunno—give me some six or eight courses o' treatment in refmetic an' maf'matics."

"I tell ye what, that man could wax egregious eloquent when he got inter maf'matics. 'Twas his theory that nothin' was too obtuse ter be found out by figgers, an' as a doctor uses quinine, arsenic an' calumny, so the schoolmaster had his pertic'lar doses fur obtuse maf'matical riddles an' probables. After he taught me ter add, divide, extract an' multiply, he put me inter rotation an' remuneration; then he slid me in order inter distractions, production, revolution, alligators, complication, equators, interest, United States money—I never got fur in that—an' sev'ral other branches, the names o' which I forgit. Prob'ly you hev the 'hull egregious lot by heart, but I consait I was never made fur a 'refmetic man."

"One day arter I got fairly ter goin' my mother wanted ter test me, an' she give me this original example; 'Ef Jane has ten apples, an' gives four ter Lemuel, how many more apples has Jane got than Lemuel?' Wal, the schoolmaster he read it, an' then a queer wrinkle run up an' down his face."

"It can't be done," sez he.

"It can't," sez I.

"No, sir," sez he, sharp-like.

"Why, I sorter 'lowed she'd hev seven left," sez I, fur I'd been studyin' hard on the problem all night."

"Very likely she would," sez he, "but it can't be proved. This is a case whar 'refmetic, elger-bray, geometries, botany an' other maf'matical branches ain't o' no avail. The subject o' this probablem is a feminine critter, an' you might as wal figger on the 'skeeters that'll be 'round in the year 1900. Figgers an' facts both fail when a woman is the object o' study; you can't depend on even the fu'st roots o' science. Go home, young man, an' tell your esteemed parent that in all probability when Jane give Lemuel them apples, she had two dozen more hid away in her gown!"

"An', Buck, it's jest the same with this hyar Nella Bryce. She's o' the female sect, an' fur that reason figgers an' sich won't a'ply. 'Tain't no sort o' use ter guess what is on her mind; the only way is ter go on an' diskiver by the nat'ral course o' events."

Buck had waited patiently for Yank to wander back to the subject.

"Figures or no figures, I think we may assume that Nella Bryce knows where the shots come from," he said.

"Of consait so."

"Moreover, she was frightened when she saw them."

"Jes' so."

"Now, these shoes fit the tracks where, according to Bart Lawless's last night's theory, the female assassin stood and fired at Walt McPherson. What then?"

"The finger o' suspicion begins ter p'int at Nella."

"As the accomplice, if not the principal."

"To be sure."

"Well, well, Nevermiss, what next?"

"Next, we must 'larn ef them shoes ree'lly did b'long ter anybody in yender house."

At this point a low whistle sounded from Trail-Lifter's lips. They looked: he made a motion; and then they saw two men approaching in such a way that they bade fair to meet where Yank and his companions stood. One of these men was the Duke of Dakota; the other was a rough but honest-looking person whom Buck dimly remembered having seen in the village before.

His Majesty came up all prepared to deliver an oration, but the unknown also had something to say. He hastily exclaimed:

"Mr. Pike, can I speak with you a moment?"

"Speak on, Fitch; speak on," replied the Duke, with a condescending wave of his hand.

"I've just got back ter town, havin' been away two days, an' I've heerd about Jo Grimes. I kin tell a bit on that subject which I feel I ought ter tell."

"Speak out, Fitch; speak out."

"Wal, sir, Grimes he came ter me Monday night an' wanted ter borry my rifle."

"Hal did he?"

"He did, fur sure."

"Did you let him have it?"

"Not I. No such crazy loon is fit ter hev a gun—at least, not mine. He said he wanted ter go huntin', but I don't reckon he could hit your tannery at ten rods."

"You did right to tell me this, Fitch. It shows that he desired a gun—even though he was never known to go hunting. Important evidence, decidedly. Now we must find what gun he did get, after failing to secure yours."

"I reckon he had mine, after all."

"He did?"

"Yes, sir."

"How's that?"

"Wal, ye see my old woman has told me a bit o' news she was afeerd to tell to the rest of ye. Last night she heerd a sound in our back room whar the rifle is kep', an' she went in ter see the cause on't. She didn't find no live thing, but one thing she did find out. My rifle was gone. She wa'n't over-sure but I had took it with me, so she did nothin' about it."

"But you hadn't the gun?"

"No, I hadn't; an' when I got home an' she tol' me erbout it, I jest howled. I went inter the back room, an' thar was the gun all right in its place. I tuk it down. Wal, gents, when I left that thar gun it was as clean as a new dollar, but I didn't find it so. Thar was smut over the hammer, an' tube, an' at the muzzle. I reckon that rifle had b'en fired jest about once!"

The significance of this remark was not to be overlooked.

"Thar's one thing more," added Fitch. "Zeke True's wife—they live next ter me—says she seen Jo Grimes by our house jest erbout the time my wife heerd the noise in the back room. She thought he'd been in ter see us, an' thought no more about it ontill to-day."

"This settles the case," said His Majesty, more gravely than usual. "Grimes stole your gun and shot McPherson. The evidence is complete."

Buck and Yank exchanged glances; the evidence did, indeed, seem to be overwhelming. Add to what Fitch had just told, the fact that Grimes had threatened McPherson, and that Brown, the gardener, had seen him near Pike's house with an object which looked like a rifle, and it would be a rash person who, judging disinterestedly, would say that there was hope that Grimes was innocent.

"Our friend, McPherson, will be avenged," added Pike, nodding to Buck.

"No doubt."

The answer was mechanical; Buck was thinking of Tillie. Whatever Grimes had done, she loved him—the blow would fall heavily upon her.

"Come to the jail with me, Fitch," continued His Majesty. "This new evidence must be noted."

They went away, and Buck and Yank looked at each other gravely.

"It looks bad," said the former.

"Egregious bad, I admit."

"Can it be that we have been on a false scent all the time?"

Nevermiss looked at the shoes.

"We're on a scent o' some sort," he then replied, "an' ef it ain't that one, what is it? Thar is some myst'ry afoot, an' it's our duty ter our pedigrees ter look it up. S'pose you go over an' talk with Tillie? I'll skip around in the meanwhile an' see ef I kin l'arn who owned them egregious shoes."

"Very well; I'll go to the cabin at once. You thought that the Grimes girl was keeping something back, and I'll try to induce her to speak out plainly."

Buck spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, and it was nothing to him that Tillie was of more than ordinary beauty. He still referred to her as he had done from the first—as "the Grimes girl," and was actuated only by the ordinary sentiments of humanity.

He crossed the village and knocked at the cabin door; it was opened by Tillie.

Her face brightened perceptibly, but it was not until he had said good-morning in a kind tone that she asked him in. People had never been willing to enter the Grimes residence in former days—why should Hampton be now, when deeper disgrace had fallen upon them?

He did enter, however, and without any evidence of reluctance.

Tillie made no apology for their poor quarters, but courteously helped him to a chair.

For the first time he felt some uneasiness. Plainly, the new evidence against her father could not have reached her ears, and it was an unpleasant duty to make it known.

He forced himself to be firm, and told all plainly, but simply. He watched her while he spoke. Something of her resolute nature was visible; she listened in silence, and her face showed little agitation, but in her eyes was an expression he had before then seen in those of a hunted animal.

CHAPTER XV.

TILLIE'S STORY.

BUCK ceased speaking, and then the marked composure suddenly vanished from Tillie's face and manner. Her face flushed deeply, and she sharply cried:

"They are determined to swear his life away!"

"Have you reason to believe that Fitch did not tell the truth?" Hampton gravely asked.

"My father never touched the rifle."

"Did he ask for it?"

"Very likely he did, though I did not know it. He was very despondent after my trouble with Zora Pike, and seemed to think that I would suffer, not being able to get enough work. He conceived the idea of hunting, and himself supplying as much as possible of the food we needed, though I do not believe he had fired a rifle in ten years—I do not know that he ever did. He may have tried to borrow Fitch's rifle for this purpose, merely to get game for us to eat."

"But it is claimed that he was seen near Fitch's house last night."

"He may have passed there."

"Then he was not in this house as—"

He hesitated, and Tillie finished the sentence. "As I said. No; he was not here all the time. I have been considering, Mr. Hampton, and have decided to be frank with you. Far better would it have been for my poor father if I had told the truth last night, but I was taken by surprise and made a grievous mistake. I do not regret the lie—if I could help my father, I would willingly lie again!"

She spoke defiantly, but Buck soothingly replied:

"Your sentiments do you honor, but your father's interests now require you to be frank with those who would see justice done him."

"I know it. I hope you will forgive me for not confiding in you and Mr. Yellowbird last night, but I knew—you admitted that you were the friend of my father's enemies."

"We did, but, Miss Grimes, we try to be just to all men. I am not a sentimentalist, but I believe that all, rich and poor, high and low, should have their rights."

"This world would not be such a desert if all men were like you."

She spoke more softly than ever before in his experience, but, suddenly arousing, she added:

"I will now tell you all, even if you are the friend of Mr. McPherson and Zora Pike."

Hampton smiled somewhat bitterly.

She hardly knew his standing with those she mentioned, and he did not see fit to tell her that his words in behalf of her and Jo Grimes had caused trouble between him and his "friends."

"Go on!" he simply directed.

"My father was out last night."

"Yes."

"He was on Pythagoras Pike's grounds."

"Yes."

"But," added Tillie, emphatically, "he was in my company at the moment when the shot was fired, and I know that he was innocent of all connection with it."

"Can you prove it?"

"There is no proof but my word."

"And—pardon me—you told a different story last night."

"It was a great mistake on my part, but the accusation came so suddenly that I lost my caution, wisdom, foresight—whatever you call it. I had reason to believe that father saw no one while he was away."

"Tell me what actually occurred. You can do so safely, for the tie which binds me to McPherson and Zora Pike is not so strong that I need hesitate to help you."

Buck spoke somewhat bitterly, but she did not notice it.

"I need hardly say, sir," she went on, with some embarrassment, "that my father's mental condition is not as good as it was. 'Crazy Jo Grimes' some persons call him here. He is not deranged, but trouble has preyed upon his mind until he is moody, sensitive, and eccentric. We have not always had justice, sir, and my poor father has been severely tried."

Tears filled her eyes, and her voice trembled. Buck Hampton forgot for the time that she was "the Grimes girl." He saw only that she was beautiful, educated, refined, womanly, and devoted to her aged father.

His chivalrous devotion to the principles of justice grew perceptibly warmer.

"Believe me, Miss Grimes, you have my sympathy," he replied.

"Thank you; I am very glad for every friend my father can have."

It was not an evasion; Buck was just enough to believe that all her thoughts were of her father.

"As to what happened last night," she resumed, "I will tell you all plainly. My father has been very bitter against Mr. McPherson. The blow he received rankled in his mind—even though it was he who struck first—for he was twice Mr. McPherson's age. But it was chiefly the trouble between Miss Pike and me that irritated him. I need not linger upon that more than to say that my work was properly done, despite her criticisms. Perhaps you don't know that during the past fortnight she has injured me among my few remaining customers by harsh comments upon my work."

"Very like her," Hampton promptly agreed.

"Father knew that she was hurting me in this way, and as he could not touch her, all his anger turned against Mr. McPherson. Last night his manner worried me, and I determined to keep sight of him. I did so for some time, but he finally eluded me."

"When I found that he was gone I was beset with a terrible fear. I felt sure that he had gone to Mr. Pike's, and what he would do I dreaded to know or think. I hurried away to find him."

"I entered Mr. Pike's grounds. In and near the house all was gayety, light, glare, and glitter. There was a chance for me to feel envious, but I could think only of the object of my errand. I went on eagerly, and suddenly came upon father. He carried a long staff, and his face was strangely pale."

"When he saw me he started and would have avoided me, but there was not time. Then he tried to show an innocence which was only assumed."

"What are you here for?" he asked. "Surely you are not going to the wedding?"

"I am going home, father," I replied. "Are you ready to go?"

"If he slowly answered; 'no, I am not ready.'"

"I put my arm around his neck."

"Come with me, father," I soothingly replied. "You and I don't want anything of these people."

"He struck his staff fiercely upon the ground."

"I want something of one of them—I have a debt to pay. Girl, do you see this club?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I am going in and break it over McPherson's shoulders!" he declared. "Hal it will be a pleasant wedding event."

"I saw that he was nervous and excited, and I clasped his neck more tightly."

"Father," said I, persuasively, "do not give these people a thought. What do we care for them? Show them how we ignore them in deed as well as in thought."

"That scoundrel and the selfish, hypocritical wretch he is to marry have wronged you," he exclaimed, breathing hard. "I will go and break this staff over his shoulders."

"And get into trouble?"

"Why not?" he answered, moodily. "I am a worn-out old man, of no use to any one."

"You are necessary to my happiness," I declared, "and it would break my heart if harm came to you."

"I had touched the chord to move him, and I

knew it; for my sake he would change all his plans, good or bad, wise or reckless. He yielded and I led him away, away from Mr. Pike's grounds and to this cabin."

"As we entered the door I heard a rifle-shot from the direction of Pike's house, and as there was no other during the evening, I know that it was that which wounded McPherson. Mr. Hampton, I swear that my father was at that moment standing beside me at this door!"

Grimes's girl concluded with marked earnestness, which seemed to Buck the personification of truth; in fact, from the very beginning she had acted like one who deviated not from the facts and kept nothing back.

On the other hand was almost overwhelming evidence against Grimes. No loop-hole of escape was visible. And opposed to plain, crushing evidence was the unsupported statement of the prisoner's daughter.

Deeply devoted as she was to him, she would be less than a woman if she would not lie for him.

What was Buck Hampton to believe?

"What was the condition of affairs at Pike's when you were on the grounds?"

"They were all laughing and talking, and I am sure that I saw McPherson by the side of Mr. Pike, on the piazza."

"What time did you reach home? Can you fix the time of the shot you heard?"

"No. I heard that it was nine o'clock, but we have neither clock nor watch."

This was frank at least.

Buck meditated until Tillie spoke again.

"To what extent will my statement be believed?"

"Frankly, it will not go far. It will be offset by the fact that you at first declared that Mr. Grimes had not been out of this house during the evening. Again, it is to be expected that you would speak for him. Against such evidence as the opposition have, your story will not have any weight. Is there absolutely no way of corroborating any part of it?"

"I know of none."

Tillie spoke in a despairing way.

"Oh!" she added, "what can I do—what can I do to save my unhappy father?"

The words cut to Hampton's heart. He was growing to be a stronger sympathizer with the old man and his daughter, but how was he to aid them? The prisoner seemed to be hopelessly in the toils.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TRAP FOR SOMEBODY.

THE day was wearing away when Hampton rejoined Yank Yellowbird.

"Wal, lad, what news?" the mountaineer asked.

"None that is good."

Yank looked at his young friend sharply. Buck's manner was both gloomy and irritable.

"Who've ye seen?"

"Tillie Grimes."

"Nobody else?"

"Nobody else."

"Then I consait that she has succeeded in int'restin' you most egregiously."

"Do you refer to Miss Grimes?"

"Land o' Goshen! who else should I refer ter? Yes, I mean her. Wal, I'm sorter glad you be int'rested; I was, right at the start. Now, I consait I'm a jedge o' women folks, an' when I see a pertic'lar fine one I kin tell it right at the start. The Yellowbird pedigree shows a heap o' sech coincidences. Tillie is a fine gal, lad, an' I don't blame you fur takin' to her. Why, by hurley, I'd enter the lists an' be your rival if I wa'n't so fur advanced along the vale o' life, an' all shook up by newrolgy."

"The point for us to consider is, how we are to save Grimes. Walt McPherson is out of danger, practically, but if the law decides that his life was attempted by Grimes, the latter will never live to serve out his term."

"Thar's an egregious pile o' triberlation an' distress in man's life."

"Hear the result of my visit to Tillie Grimes."

Buck described the visit. He did not disguise the fact that he had grown more interested in Tillie, but he ascribed it all to simple humanity. He ended with these words:

"Yank, that girl is no ordinary person. She is one who feels deeply, loves strongly and is sensitive and, despite her ability to preserve a brave demeanor, easily depressed. If her father is found guilty, it will kill her."

The mountaineer caressed his beard in a perturbed way. Then he shook his head gloomily.

"Can't see no light, by hurley!"

"Appearances are against Grimes."

"Egregiously so."

"Nevermiss, do you believe him guilty?"

Yank pointed his finger at Buck like a question mark.

"Wouldn't it take an atrocious heap o' faith fur me ter say I believe him innocent?"

"I admit it. Strictly speaking, you and I do violence to common sense to say that we believe him innocent—and yet, she says she was with him when the fatal shot was fired."

"Who knows but thar was two shots? The

one she heard may hev been half an hour arter the one that hit Walt. In the excitement we wouldn't notice it."

"Turn which way we will, everything is against Jo Grimes."

"Ef he's innercent it shall be proved ef I rip things all up around Big Missouri—it shall, by hurley!"

Yank brought his broad hand down upon his knee forcibly, and, having thus relieved his feelings, proceeded to explain that he had not gained any light since he saw Buck before; the ownership of the shoes was as much in doubt as ever.

"To return ter the shoes, you said this mornin' you had left Pike's fur good."

"I have."

"Did ye tell him so?"

"No."

"Then I want you ter go back."

"I dislike to very much, but if you can give me good reasons I will go."

"The reason is that I want ye ter ketch a fish. Who the fish is I dunno, but the shoes is the bait, an' you must be the fisherman."

"In other words, you think that some one in Pike's house can explain who owns the shoes, and that by going there I may trap somebody?"

"To be sure."

"I'll do it. But what is your plan?"

"Has the door o' yer room a lock?"

"No. The one Walt and I occupied had one, but Pike had to put me in a common, half-finished room last night. There is no lock."

"Good! Now I want ye ter take them shoes ter Pike's, say that you found 'em under the fence, an' that they fit the tracks made nigh the smoked bullet-patch. Don't know any more than this, nor any less. Ter-night, take the shoes ter yer room. It'll s'prise me egregious ef thar ain't some thief in yer room 'fore mornin'."

"And I must remain awake and nab him?"

"Or her. Yas."

"I'll do it, and as the first step, I'll lie down at once and secure two hours of sleep."

This plan was carried out, and it was very near the supper hour when Hampton reappeared at Pike's. His Majesty was in good-humor, and pleased to see the young man back.

By good luck he and one of the servants were in the room, and Buck promptly produced the shoes, and told the story arranged by Yank. With this evidence he knew it would soon be all over the house. The servant would tell the other servants, while Zora and McPherson would hear it from the same source, or from Mr. Pike.

Upon the latter the story produced no effect, while the servant, though he listened with wide-open eyes, showed no guilt or confusion. Pike commented upon the story according to the way in which it had been told.

"There is nothing in it that need hold your attention, Mr. Hampton; I say this as a practical man. You found them under the fence, and they fit the prints of women's feet in the grounds. So far, all right; but as we have proved that those footprints have no connection with the shooting, it is of no consequence what history is attached to the shoes."

"Such does seem to be the case," replied Buck with a very innocent air, "but as a tragedy often has hidden features, I am going to keep these shoes right in my room and investigate. Something may come of it."

At this point the servant left the room, and, feeling sure that he had started the story through the house, Buck added:

"Of course, however, there isn't one chance in a hundred that they amount to anything. Your ideas are doubtless quite correct."

Unconscious of the stratagem being used, the Duke of Dakota allowed himself to be put in good-humor by the last words, and he mentally pronounced Hampton a fine fellow, and drifted off into an essay upon his ruling passion—the idea of making wild Indians into matter-of-fact laboring men.

Zora did not make her appearance at supper, or during the evening. His Majesty presented the excuse that she was caring for McPherson. Buck believed that she was still in a vicious mood, but it was something for which he no longer cared, and he was reconciled to her absence.

In due time he retired.

When he did so he passed through the hall in plain sight of one of the servants, with the shoes conspicuously carried for that person's benefit. He only hoped that this fresh item of news would spread—and he believed that it would.

Entering his room he placed the shoes upon the table, and for a few minutes left the door open. After a few minutes he heard some one pass through the hall. He had hoped for this, and had intended to be on the watch, but, for once, he failed.

He heard footsteps, and the rustle of a dress, but saw no one. He stepped to the door; the unknown had disappeared. Buck smiled grimly; if the unknown had been reconnoitering, the shoes must have been very plainly seen.

Closing the door he proceeded to arrange the lamp at the back of the bed so that it would give forth no light in the room. This he did by barricading it, but in such a way that two

motions at any time during the night would produce it, and give instant light to the whole room.

His preparations completed, he lay down.

The prospect before him was far from pleasant. He must remain awake all night—or until some one entered his trap—and, despite the fact that he had secured two hours' sleep a little before, it would be dreary enough lying there in the dark.

The vigil began.

The house grew quiet, and Buck had not the privilege of sleeping.

Eleven o'clock struck—twelve—one!

Buck had become sleepy, and his vigil had grown hard, but he kept it up stubbornly. The more improbable his chances of success, the more need of persistence, he argued.

Hark! What was that? A step in the hall? Probably one of McPherson's watchers, though why one should be there was uncertain.

Suddenly Buck grew keenly alert. He had heard no more, but a slight current of air had struck his face. It could have but one source—the door was open!

CHAPTER XVII.

SOMEBODY ENTERS THE TRAP.

BUCK directed his attention toward the suspicious quarter with all possible keenness, but the darkness baffled his gaze. Still, he was positive that the door was open, and, though it was not locked, he knew that no accident had opened it.

The work had been done by human hands, and that too, with great caution and skill.

Without moving even a hand, Buck listened intently.

He believed that he could hear subdued breathing, but the absence of other sounds showed that the intruder had paused to listen and make sure that all was right.

Seconds swelled to minutes, and this pause continued, but, presently, there was more for Buck to hear—the faintest possible rustling of garments. He could not hear a footfall, but he felt sure that the unknown was creeping forward.

Clearly, he had to deal with one who possessed skill and caution to a remarkable degree.

Trying to equal the unknown in these respects, Buck prepared for the exposure.

A slight sound arose from the vicinity of the table, and it flashed upon Buck that the intruder had found the shoes. Then, if ever, was his time of action. He moved with rapidity.

A slight rustling, as the covers of the lamp were cast aside—and then the room was filled with light, and Buck Hampton sat up in bed with his revolver covering the intruder.

Beside the table, holding the shoes in one hand, stood a man who might have served as the statue of guilt and dismay, his own gaze fixed upon Buck. He could not have been exposed at a more timely moment, for the shoes which he held so tightly betrayed him completely.

A period of dead silence followed.

In one respect Buck was as much surprised as the man he had caught in the trap.

The intruder was an Indian.

More than that, he was a greasy, dirty, remarkably disreputable-looking Indian, and Buck, who had seen him twice before, recognized the vagabond Sioux who had fired at him on his way to Big Missouri.

It was Tommy Bowlegs.

With an effort, Hampton recovered his presence of mind.

"Stand where you are!" he commanded, in a subdued but incisive voice. "If you stir out of your tracks, I'll shoot you!"

With this threat he slid to the floor and proceeded to close the door; not once removing his gaze from the Indian; not once lowering his revolver.

Greatly surprised was Buck Hampton. Some one had been caught in his trap, but of all men he had least thought of seeing Tommy Bowlegs. How had he entered the house? What were the shoes to him? Admitting that he had an interest in them, how had he known so exactly where to find them?

Having closed the door Buck spoke again.

"What are you doing here?" he sternly asked.

Tommy Bowlegs answered, and as he did so his hand wandered slyly to the table and he laid the shoes down quietly, as though he hoped thereby to avoid drawing attention to them.

"Me tired; came in to rest," he said, humbly—and no other red-man could equal Tommy Bowlegs in point of humbleness when he tried.

"How did you get into the house?"

"Door open."

"Don't lie! At this hour—"

"Come in long 'go. Lay down; go sleep. Wake up; house dark; shut in."

The vagabond spoke glibly, and Hampton began to see that he had no mean opponent.

"What were you doing with those shoes?"

"Pick dem up; not know what dey be. Me look—see—put dem down."

"Do you want them?"

Buck hoped to trap the Sioux, but the latter betrayed no interest. He shook his head and pointed to his feet.

"Shoes too small."

"You can sell them."

"No. Me try; git 'rested for thief. Me no thief; me honest. Me good Injun!"

"You're a jewel!" sarcastically retorted Hampton. "Bowlegs, you're the biggest liar I ever knew!"

"No, no!" protested the vagabond, with an air of shocked surprise.

"You may as well tell me the truth. What did you want of those shoes?"

"Me no want 'em."

"You are a liar, Bowlegs! See here, I have been lying awake all night up to the present time to catch you; I expected this visit. Well, you came. Will you tell me why?"

Imperturbably Bowlegs replied:

"Wake up; house locked; can't open door; try to find way out; come here. Me sorry to disturb you; me go out now."

"No you won't. You and I have a case to settle first. Now don't you lie again. Who sent you to get these shoes?"

"Nobody send me."

"False, Bowlegs. You did not fall asleep in this house, but somebody admitted you. It was done so that you could get the shoes. Who let you in?"

"Nobody—"

"Bowlegs," sharply interrupted Hampton, "two weeks ago you tried to shoot me in the bush south of here. Why you did it I don't know, but you ran the risk of getting your neck into a noose. You kept out of sight for some days; in fact, beyond one casual glimpse, I have never seen you since until to-night; but you have not atoned for your offense. Now, my man, if you don't tell the truth about this last affair I will turn you over to the law. You've seen men hung, haven't you, Bowlegs?"

He hoped to frighten the vagabond, but the latter smiled and nodded good-humoredly.

"Put noose 'round neck; pull up in air; poaty soon dead; no more trouble," he fluently explained.

"Well, I propose to have you hung."

"Good!" granted Bowlegs, with modest approval.

"Come, come, my man," exclaimed Buck, a good deal staggered, "you don't want to get into trouble. Tell me just why you are here, and who sent you, and I will let you off."

"Me told all."

"You are lying, and I know it. The idea that you were wandering around here by accident! Why, you opened the door without a sound, listened a long time, and then crept to the table like a cat, and in a direct line. I expected some one; I set a trap; I caught you. Your lies are utterly useless. Why not own up and save your own hide?"

"White man too suspicious," observed Bowlegs, coolly. "He see crooked; perhaps think crooked. Injun don't."

"You scoundrel!" muttered Buck.

"Me only poor Injun."

"You are a villainously poor specimen. Well, if I must have you shut up, I will."

"All right!"

The fellow's coolness angered Hampton almost to fury. He felt like falling upon him and beating him, but realized that it would be as useless as questioning—and that was wholly thrown away. Bowlegs had made an explanation both unreasonable and absurd, but it availed as little to show him the weak points in it as did every other kind of argument.

Buck was at a loss what to do. Up to the time when the first word was spoken the trap had worked admirably. The game had come to it, and Yank Yellowbird's judgment, in planning the trap had been fully vindicated, but what had been caught?

An Indian who was either very stupid or very cunning.

By this time Hampton had a clear idea which it was.

He would gladly have had Yank there to assume charge of affairs. He was puzzled to understand Tommy Bowlegs's connection with the affair. Who would take him for any ally? It seemed impossible that any one should, yet Buck was positive that the vagabond Sioux had an associate in the house.

Let that be as it might, what was Buck to do with him?

According to Yank's account, Bowlegs seldom raised his hand against any one unless he could strike secretly and from the rear—he had even been known to submit to a beating without making an effort to defend himself.

Buck arrived at a decision.

He would at once take the Indian to Yank.

If the mountaineer knew how to deal with him, he was the man to do it; Buck felt that he might talk all night and make absolutely no advance toward the desired object.

Without a word of explanation he put on his hat. All his other garments had been retained when he lay down, and to rival Bowlegs's noiseless ways, he proposed to go without stockings.

"Indian," he then said, "we are going from this house to the open air. I shall carry this revolver at your back. If you try to run away I shall shoot."

"Me no run 'way; like go walk wid you."

"You're a shrewd knave, and as treacherous as Judas!" retorted Buck. "I wouldn't trust you anyhow. Now go on, but go carefully. Mind you, if you try to alarm the house I'll put a bullet through you."

This was another attempt to frighten the Sioux, but Bowlegs stolidly answered:

"Me go careful."

It was as though a machine had spoken, but for once the vagabond kept his word. He left the house with a degree of caution which Buck tried in vain to equal. Once in the open air the captor pointed to the west and tersely ordered Bowlegs to proceed.

They moved through the grounds. The Indian went very demurely until the gate was reached; he opened it, at Buck's order, and passed through. Then came a change.

Suddenly the gate was slammed to in Hampton's face, and in a moment more Tommy Bowlegs was bounding away at a speed a deer might well have envied.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WRONG MAN.

TOMMY BOWLEGS's conduct was just what Buck had reason to expect after Yank's description of him, yet, so well had the fellow played his part, he took Buck by surprise.

By the time that the latter had opened the obstructing gate Bowlegs had a good start, but Buck was not disposed to give up easily. He pursued at full speed.

Once he ordered the Indian to halt, threatening to fire, but not a word of answer was made. The fugitive devoted all his energy to running, and, so well did he succeed, he rapidly left the pursuer in the rear.

Buck knew that the race was lost unless some unforeseen chance aided him, but he did not yield until the vagabond faded away in the darkness, and he lost all trace of him.

Then Buck turned back in an angry mood.

He considered it a disgrace to be outwitted and beaten by Tommy Bowlegs. If he had known the man better he would have been of a different mind.

Late as it was he decided to see Yank at once. He went to the hotel, aroused the clerk after some trouble, and—found Yank out. Where he was the clerk did not know; he had supposed that the mountaineer was in his room. Buck started back and met Yank at the door.

"Hullo, lad!" quoth Nevermiss, "you walk late."

"The same remark will apply to you."

"To be sure."

"I have been to the hotel to see you, having something of importance to say. The trap caught some one. It was Tommy Bowlegs."

Yank did not exhibit the degree of surprise Buck had expected to see.

"I reckoned it would ketch somebody. Tell me all about it."

Buck obeyed, and the mountaineer heard the full story of Tommy's detection, capture and escape. The narrator expressed his chagrin at the way the matter ended, but Yank quietly replied:

"Don't let it trouble ye. That atrocious insex is sharper than most men, an' I dunno what we'd done with him ef you'd brought him ter me. It's one thing ter question him, an' another ter make the varmint talk."

"He must be made to talk. It only adds to the mystery to know him as the thief, and it is so plain that he was there to secure the shoes, and for no other purpose, that it becomes more than necessary that he should talk. What is the importance connected with the shoes? Who sent Bowlegs ter get them?—for that he had an ally in the house is certain."

"Perhaps I kin name the ally."

"Who would you name?"

"Who d'ye think?"

"Nella Bryce?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"Wal, lad, I've been out ter-night, myself, an' I seen that which looks sorter important, takin' it in connection with what you seen. I went nigh the Duke o' Dakota's house, an' right under his castle walls I seen Tommy Bowlegs an' no other person talkin'. Guess who?"

"Not Nella?"

"No."

"Certainly not Pike, himself?"

"No."

"One of the servants?"

"You're groupin' them now, so I'll come right ter the p'int. It was Zora Pike!"

"She was talking with Bowlegs?"

"To be sure."

"By Heaven!" cried Buck, with stern indignation, "what condition of affairs exists at that house?"

"It must be an egregious bad one when it makes allies o' Zora Pike an' sech an atrocious insex as Tommy. Now I ain't finikel, but I wouldn't be seen robbin' a hen-roost with that chap—I wouldn't by hurley!"

"There is no longer a doubt who sent the Sioux to my room. By my life, Yank, I am more hurt than pleased at this discovery. Zora Pike is the affianced of my friend, while Bowlegs—"

He finished with a gesture of disgust.

"I deem it my duty ter say that this was afore nine o'clock," Yank added, "an' their interview may 'a' b'en a nat'ral one. Thar's an artom o' hope that they met by chance, an' didn't plot no treason. We're all liable ter make mistakes. You be, an' so be I, though the Yellowbirds aim ter be right. I go wrong now an' then, owin' chiefly ter the newrology an' the weak sister; an' in order ter uphold the fam'ly pedigree, I try ter make sure afore I jedge a case."

"When I's a medikel student in the East, we had a case in the horspittle whar a man had been kicked down-stairs by another man, an' was brung in suff'rin' egregious with his right leg, an' onable ter stan' on it. The head doctor looked at it, an' then shook his head solemn."

"This is serious," sez he.

"Atrocious serious," sez the patient.

"I consait the leg 'll hev ter come off," sez the doctor.

"I sha'n't agree," sez the patient.

"But you've got a profound, malev'lent fractur'," sez the doctor.

"What on't?" sez the patient; "my bones heal easy. Glue my knee an' elbow tergether, an' they'll knit inter one bone in a week."

"This is a hopeless case," sez the doctor, frownin'. "The leg must come off, or you're a dead man. The *tibulum* is fractured in five places, an' the *fibulum* is ground ter artoms. Besides this, thar is a ginerall upheaval o' the foot; the *oh-strangle-us* is out o' place; the *ox-skull-sis* an' the *seraphoid* is gone entirely; an' the phalanxes o' the toes is crushed fine."

"That sounds bad in skience," sez the patient, "but I mean ter pull through jest the same. You'll see me runnin' a foot-race inside a year."

"Can't be done," sez the doctor; "the *patent-leather*, which in Greek is the knee pan, is split inter tooth-picks, an' you'll never step ag'in. That leg must come off!"

"That leg won't come off!" sez the patient, "an' I'll tell ye why. The other feller kicked me down-stairs, an' I won't never rest easy on'til I've kicked him down-stairs. I hate ter be contrary, an' in any ordinary case I'd oblige ye an' let ye take off the egregious leg; but, doctor, I need that leg ter kick the other feller, an' I'll stick to it ef the patent-leather, *tibulum*, *fibulum*, *oh-strangle-us* an' all the atrocious phalanxes are gone ter thunder!"

"He deserved success," observed Buck. "I suppose he recovered and kicked the other man." "No, he didn't, but 'twan't his fault he failed. It proved that the head doctor had made an egregious blunder in his diagnostersis—the patient's leg was only sprained, while the feller who kicked him was hurt so bad that they had ter amputate both legs, so he wa'n't a fit subject fur a kickin'. Wal, the head doctor got the wrong person—we may do the same."

"True."

"We was speakin' o' Zora Pike."

"Yes."

"It does look as though she sent Bowlegs ter your room, but we may be mistookin'."

"The evidence is strong against her. Clearly, he was admitted by some one inside the house."

"I consait so."

"To secure the shoes."

"Jos' so."

"Well, now I maintain that if any one of the servants had desired them she, or he, would have gone to my room. Miss Pike, alone, would let scruples stand in the way of her doing so. Don't I make a point there?"

"You sartainly do."

"Well, just before Bowlegs came in you saw him and Zora in consultation. What is the natural inference?"

"I hate ter b'lieve this," returned Yank, slowly, "but I admit it looks bad. It ain't my idee o' the gal that she would connive with such an atrocious insex as Bowlegs. She is weak, fretful an', at times, onjust. So is the Duke o' Dakota, obstatinate an' pig-headed. But onder all I hev allowed both was good-hearted an' wal meanin'."

Buck remembered Zora's unjust words to him, and did not admit feeling an opinion like Yank's. The latter continued, after a pause:

"Whatever it is, we must git at it by secret means. I'm rather glad Bowlegs got away from ye. I couldn't 'a' got any more out o' the egregious critter than you did, an' I'd hate like burley ter be wusted by him. The Yellowbirds hev a constitutional objection ter bein' licked, anyhow; an' specially by such an insex as Bowlegs."

For an hour Yank and Buck remained in conversation. The latter was a good deal disappointed to find that the latest discoveries did not show Nevermiss his way clear, but it was not to be wondered at. There was underhand work in Pike's house, but as suspicion pointed to Zora, they could only wait and watch.

They could find no ally in the Duke's residence.

The fact was fully established that the shoes were objects of importance in some way, but that they had any connection with the shooting of McPherson had not been shown.

When they separated Yank kept the shoes. Both men believed that further attempts would

be made to recover them, so it was thought best that the mountaineer should secrete them.

Buck walked back toward His Majesty's house in a thoughtful mood.

He had gone half the distance when a man near at hand arrested his attention. He paused, looked around, and saw a dark object on the ground. He moved toward it and found that it was a man.

His coming did not seem to attract attention, and he stooped and touched the unknown's shoulder. He was somewhat wary, for he did not know but a trap lurked there for him.

The touch served to arouse the man. He stirred and spoke faintly:

"Who is there?"

"An honest man," Buck guardedly replied.

"If that's so I need your help. I'm beaten to a jelly."

"What has happened?"

"I've been set upon and almost murdered by some ruffians. Feel of my head!"

Buck obeyed, and took his hand away wet with something he was not at loss to name. He quickly struck a match. Its transient light showed a man who was a stranger to him, and one in a sore plight. There were ugly bruises on his head, and his face was pale where it was not marked with blood.

"By my life!" Buck exclaimed, "you have been badly used. Wait a moment and I will bring you water from the river. I'll see you through with this."

He brought the water in his hat, having no better means, and when the man had drank eagerly, bathed his bruised head with what was left.

"What was the cause of this?" he continued.

"I don't know," groaned the victim. "They set upon me, three to one, and I reckon I'm a dead man."

"I hope not; I don't think any bones are broken, and you will revive presently. Who assaulted you?"

"I don't know; I only wish I did. It's hard to be half-murdered for another man, and then not know who did it."

"So you suffered for another man. Do you mean that they struck him through you?"

"I mean that they got the wrong man. They thought I was a person named Buck Hampton!"

CHAPTER XIX.

ZORA HAS SOMETHING TO SAY.

SILENCE followed this revelation. Buck had started at hearing his own name mentioned, but he rallied as soon as possible.

"How do you know that they mistook you for Buck Hampton?" he asked.

"I heard them say so. They didn't stop for nothing when they set upon me, and they beat me down with their clubs as though I had been a dog. I tried to fight them off, but I was unarmed, and what could I do against three ruffians with clubs?"

"A poor chance, surely. Go on with your story!"

"They beat me down, and when they had pounded me helpless, they condescended to use their eyes. One fellow had run his hand into my pocket, as though in search of something, when another spoke out quick. 'We've got the wrong man!' says he; 'this ain't Buck Hampton!' Upon this they stopped right there and held a whispered consultation. My head was weak, dizzy and aching, and I couldn't catch much that they said, but I made out that they had laid in wait for Hampton and got me by mistake."

"That was hard, certainly," replied Buck, in a stern voice.

"It was nearly the death of me."

"What did the men want of Hampton?"

"I don't know."

"You say they began to search you?"

"Yes."

"They must have wanted something he had."

"Yes; but they meant to kill him, too. I heard them say that when they were clubbing me."

"Have you no idea who these men were?"

"None at all. I'm a new-comer in town and don't know nobody well, and the darkness was too much for my eyesight. The scoundrels have got away without leaving me a clew."

"You think they meant to do murder, do you?"

"I know they did. They thought I was dead when they began to search me, but when they found they had got the wrong man they looked me over, and, finding that I wasn't dead, said they were glad of it. If I'd been Hampton, there would have been a dead man here now."

Buck did not answer. He realized that perhaps this man had unwittingly saved him from death; certainly the will of the assailants had been good enough to do the dark deed.

Buck's lips curled with scorn. He considered the unknown men as cowardly as they were vicious, and only wished that he had been soon enough to aid this battered stranger, who had fought three men as his unconscious substitute.

Under this lay the significant fact that his own life had been aimed at. Why had it been done? Before the shooting of Walt McPherson he had not had an enemy in Big Missouri. He had made enemies since, and though he had not

expected an attack, he believed that it was all due to his efforts in behalf of Grimes and his daughter.

Clearly there was more animosity and desperation in the case than he had imagined.

He continued his ministrations to the wounded man, and soon found that he was not so badly injured as had at first seemed to be the case. His wounds were painful, and the scalp was bruised and cut in several places, but when Buck first found him he had been in a semi-stunned condition which had made him seem worse than he was.

Gradually his head cleared and his strength returned, and he suddenly arose and declared himself fully recovered.

This pleased Buck, who had taken a fancy not to reveal his identity. As the man now was, he would be able to go to the hotel where he was staying, alone. Buck suggested that he keep the facts of the assault secret, say nothing about the man for whom he had been mistaken, but quietly pursue his search for the assailants.

The man—who gave the name of Powers—fell in with his suggestion, and agreed to abide by it. Buck accompanied him until near the hotel, and then turned toward Pike's once more.

He reached the house without adventure.

Once in his room, he barricaded the door and lay down, but it was some time before he fell asleep. There was too much to occupy his thoughts. He saw clearly that he had drawn the hostility of unknown enemies upon him—from that time he would have to guard himself carefully.

He fell asleep at last, and the remainder of the night passed peacefully. In the morning he met only the Duke of Dakota at breakfast, but, as he arose to leave the dining-room, he was accosted by Nella Bryce.

The girl was as pert and smiling as usual, and she informed him that Zora wished to see him in the parlor. There was a light in her eyes as she spoke which he did not understand—it seemed like that of triumph—and he decided that some new outbreak on the part of Miss Pike was to be expected.

He went promptly to the place of meeting.

Zora was already there, and she rose to greet him with her sunniest smile.

"Good-morning, Mr. Hampton," she said.

"Good-morning," he stiffly replied.

"I am bearer of a note from Walter. Please read it," she added, in a gentle, melodious voice.

Silently Buck obeyed, and this is what he read:

"DEAR BUCK:—If such a thing is possible, pray pardon my absurd conduct. I acted hastily in blaming you for your action the night I was wounded. I now see more clearly, and beg that you will pardon a sick man's childish temper. As usual, you were right and I was wrong. I beg your pardon. Shall we forget the trifling clash? This is in Zora's writing, but is dictated by

"WALT MCPHERSON."

As Hampton lowered the note Zora spoke again.

"Mr. Hampton, if Walt owed you an apology, I owe you far more. I had no excuse; I was not ill and wounded. I don't know how to plead for myself, except to say that I was so dreadfully worried and unnerved by Walt's condition that I was not myself. But to think that I should doubt Walt's best friend! It is dreadful! I know I don't deserve to be forgiven, but if you can overlook it, I will try and repay you by not offending again!"

What an easy flow of words!

What a pretty penitent!

How beseechingly she looked up into his face!

She would have conquered almost any man then, but Buck Hampton was not moved in the least. He had seen pretty women before that day; he had felt their power, and had paid them homage; but under all was a vein of deliberateness in his nature.

Even a pretty face would not lead him to go contrary to all the dictates of common sense and prudence.

Zora's new departure would inevitably have hardened him against her, instead of having the contrary effect, but he remembered that she was Walt's affianced and would not quarrel with her. The principal thought in his mind was that of curiosity.

What had led her to adopt this new course?

"You don't answer," added Zora, still smiling.

"I needed a little time to recover from my surprise," he calmly replied.

"Does it surprise you to see me do you justice?"

"That hardly expresses it. Your change of opinion was hardly expected. However, I am not forgetful of the fact that Walt and I are old friends. I will willingly put all differences aside, but in so doing I must make one reservation."

"What is that, pray?"

"I must maintain my position toward Joseph Grimes and his daughter."

"What is your position toward them?"

Zora still smiled, and showed not the least temper or petulance, but he caught a peculiar

gleam in her eyes. If he read it aright, she had a good deal of curiosity, and was glad that a chance had been offered to ask the question.

"I maintain," he replied, "that they are as deserving of justice as though they were rich and influential, instead of poor. Miss Grimes is a lonely, friendless girl—Yank Yellowbird and I wish to do all we can to help her bear her trouble."

Until the last sentence Zora had remained quiet and calm—even smiling—but that clearly tried her severely.

For a moment anger and, perhaps, jealousy showed in her face and in her eyes, but she made an effort and rallied.

"Of course that don't concern me; you and Walt can settle that part. And now, one thing more. A few days ago I carelessly lost a pair of shoes. My ward, Nella Bryce, tells me you have found them."

She was smiling again, but Buck looked at her in a dumfounded way.

"The Bryce girl declared that they were not yours."

"So she tells me, but she has since remembered that I had such a pair. She was in ill-humor when you showed them to her, and did not examine them as she should."

Buck looked the speaker keenly, almost sternly, in the face, but she did not waver.

"May I ask how you lost the shoes?"

"I wore them into the grounds, taking my slippers to put on when the dew disappeared. I carried out my plan, but forgot to bring the shoes in."

"Then there is no mystery about them?"

Zora looked surprised.

"Mystery! Why, certainly not. Why should you imagine such a thing?"

Very frank and pleasant seemed the question, and Buck made a sudden resolution; he would see Yank before saying more.

"A fancy of mine; that's all," he replied.

"You shall have the shoes."

She laughed lightly.

"I see you are willing to yield to me in all things except as regards your allegiance to Miss Grimes."

"I have acknowledged no allegiance, Miss Zora."

"Of course that is nothing to me; I shall object to nothing if Walt don't. Whatever you and he agree to, I will consider satisfactory. And now let me take you to Walt."

They went at once.

An hour later Hampton appeared at the hotel, and was soon in Yellowbird's room. To the mountaineer he told the whole story, and then he demanded with far more excitement than was usual to his cool nature:

"What in the world are we to think of this?"

Nevermiss made answer with unusual gravity:

"I consait our game is blocked."

"Why so?"

"Ef I ain't egregiously mistook, this is a game ter head us off."

"On Miss Pike's part?"

"I won't say that, fur I ain't sartain; but either she is fur more innocent an' honest than we hev been ratin' her in the bill o' partic'lars, or else she is most atrocious sharp. Thar ain't no half-way business about her. We hev wronged her unjustly, or we ain't wronged her half enough. Them is my ideas."

"But why is our game blocked? as you expressed it?"

"Fu'stly, your make-up with Walt will be follered by mine—that will hamper us. Next, Zora claims the shoes, an' tells their story simply; an' even ef we don't take her word for it, her claims will cripple us a good deal. We ain't idyits enough ter give up the case, but it wouldn't s'prise me ef we now strike bad luck."

"What about Zora's sudden claim to the shoes?"

"Ef anybody imagines thar ain't a nigger in the wood-pile thar, they're egregiously mistaken."

"But how do you explain it?"

"I don't explain it; I only wish I could. Thar is a big myst'ry som'ers, an' I can't exactly see clear. I ain't finikel, but my opinion o' the Duke's dar'ter don't improve. She may hev had a change o' heart, but it don't look an' artom like it."

"On the contrary, her sudden civility to me, and her attempt to regain the shoes, looks like a move to stop dangerous investigations on our part."

"Don't let us wrong the gal," replied Nevermiss, cautiously. "Sarcumstances are sometimes atrocious deceitful. Bad as it looks, we may be wrong."

"Somebody was very much in earnest when that poor fellow was half murdered for me."

"I consait so. That a'fair shows that somebody is as full o' sin an' malev'lence as they kin stick. Who? Why, the reel murderers, o' course. You kin bet a dollar an' some odd change that Jo Grimes is as innocent as we be—an' the good Lord knows none ov the Yellowbirds would mix up with sech work."

The mountaineer was silent for a moment, and then he slowly added:

"I reckon we'll be obleeged ter give up the

shoes ter Zora, though it is bad for us. We'll keep right on though an' try ter find light. We may git a rush on't—it wouldn't s'prise me ef the enemy was ter make another bold move."

CHAPTER XX.

A DARK CHARGE AGAINST GRIMES.

ANOTHER day dawned. Peacefully the sun rose and cast his beams upon the hills and valleys, around Big Missouri; upon the frothing water of Racer River; the grim, unfinished tannery; His Majesty's house and the town in general.

It was a calm, peaceful scene, and as the people of the village began to stir out they had a quiet, indolent way in keeping with it.

Within an hour all was changed. Excitement and bustle took the place of all this, and men and women gathered in groups and talked animatedly. They had ample food for conversation.

Over at the jail a man lay wounded almost to death, and the prisoner who had been there was gone.

The news spread rapidly. Jo Grimes had broken jail, and, in order to escape, had beaten his solitary guard until that man's life was a thing for which the doctor would not vouch—he might live, or his life might go out like a candle.

Buck Hampton had just left Pike's house to get a little exercise, and it was Yank Yellowbird who brought him the news.

"Le's go ter the jail at once," the veteran added.

"This is bad business, mountaineer," replied Buck, gravely.

"I consait so."

"We shall not find it so easy to excuse Grimes in this case—if it is as you have heard."

Yank shook his head and did not reply.

When they reached the jail they found half of the male citizens gathered there. Pushing to the front they saw the guard lying upon a rude bed which had been made for him on the floor. The doctor had been before them and removed the worst traces of his misfortune, but his head was bandaged, his face pale, and as he lay there with closed eyes he seemed like a dead man.

Just then Pythagoras Pike arrived.

He had come principally to take an official account of what had happened. He was the only magistrate in Big Missouri, and had hastened to do his duty. His appearance then surprised all. In the presence of this desperately wounded man he became as gentle and sympathetic as any one there.

A kind heart beat under His Majesty's pompous exterior, after all.

He spoke to the guard, who partially opened his eyes.

"Do you know me, Foote?"

"Yes," was the feeble reply.

"I want to get the facts about the assault upon you. Can you tell me?"

"I'll try."

"Who did this to you?"

Pike pointed to the guard's bruised head.

"Jo Grimes."

"Tell us how it happened."

"I don't exactly know. I was in this room, and I reckon I fell inter a doze. The first thing I knew I got a blow right on the head. That woke me quick. I tried to git up, but he hit ag'in, an' I fell back inter my chair. I felt my senses leavin' me, but he hit ag'in an' ag'in. I lost my senses entire, an' when I come to, the men were here bathin' my head."

This story was told brokenly, the speaker often pausing through weakness.

"Did you see Grimes plainly?"

"Yes."

"And you are sure it was he who beat you?"

"Yes."

"Now," said Pike, rising, "let us see how he left the inner room."

He was shown. The wood of the door had been cut through, and the lock removed.

"He had a knife, and a keen one," continued His Majesty. "Foote, did you allow Grimes to have a knife?"

"No."

"Did you know of his having one?"

"No."

"Then it was passed in to him."

Yank and Buck exchanged glances. They expected the next question to point to the identity of the person who had furnished the knife, but it was not asked. Pike turned toward the group of men.

"Fellow-citizens," he added, with growing pomposity, "we have another crime to deal with. Two foul outrages have been committed in our midst within the week, and one man perpetrated both deeds. I am a practical man, and I propose to deal practically with this affair. The red-handed assassin must not be allowed to escape, for it would be an ineffaceable blot upon the fair fame of our young town. Such being the case I hereby offer a reward of three hundred dollars, out of my own pocket, for the capture of Jo Grimes!"

"Hurrah!" cried a rough-looking man, "we'll have Grimes and the reward before night."

"Yes," added another, "an' when we get him, the sooner he is strung up, the better."

"I'd like," said Yank Yellowbird, addressing Pike in a mild voice, "ter hev you ask Foote in a very plain voice ef he see the face o' Grimes when he was bein' pounded—see it distinctly—or only guessed at what he said about it bein' Grimes."

"Can you doubt that it was he?"

"We want to make sure thar wa'n't no mistake."

"There can be none. The door shows that he got loose himself."

Yank looked at the door, but made no reply.

"To oblige you, friend Yellowbird, I will ask the question you suggest."

Foote had closed his eyes, and seemed to have relapsed into a stupor, but his attention was again attracted after some effort.

"Can you understand me, Foote?" Pike asked.

"Why, of course."

"When Grimes assaulted you, did you see his face plainly?"

"Yes, of course."

"And you are sure it was Grimes?"

"I be."

His Majesty arose.

"That settles it. Men, go out and search for Grimes. Remember, three hundred dollars to whoever finds him."

The men went out hastily. The sum offered was sufficient inducement to urge them on in the matter, and, besides, their anger burned at fever-heat against Grimes. They had never liked him, while Foote had been a favorite.

Cupidity and a desire for revenge alike urged them on.

There were some, however, who did not go to take part in the man-hunt. Among these were Buck and Yank. They went aside with a silent understanding, and, when at a safe distance, the mountaineer paused and looked at his companion.

"Lad," he said, after a pause, "what sort o' a cause hev we took up the sword an' hatchet fur?"

"There is now none so poor to do Joseph Grimes honor," Buck replied.

"I consait not."

"The instinct of self-preservation is strong, yet, if Grimes was innocent, he has paid for transient liberty at high cost."

"To be sure."

"Who conveyed the knife to him?"

"Is thar more than one person in Big Missouri who would do it?"

"Only one. Poor Tillie! She cannot be blamed for what she has done. It was filial devotion, and she did not know what would be the result."

Yank laid his hand upon Buck's arm.

"Come with me, lad," he said, quietly.

Hampton went without a word; he knew to what place he would be conducted. They passed through the village to the Grimes cabin. They knocked at the door; no answer was returned. Nevermiss looked significantly at Buck, and then tried the door. It swung open unresistingly.

An unexpected scene met their view.

The interior was not unoccupied, as they had expected—upon the floor knelt Tillie Grimes, her face concealed from their view, her hands clasped and raised, as though in prayer.

A swift change became visible in the beholders' expressions; their faces grew gentler, less somber. But the girl suddenly sprang to her feet and confronted them, and her manner then was like that of a young panther.

Bitter, defiant, and aggressive was her expression, though there were traces of tears on her face. But as she saw who was there all that was hard and angry faded away.

"Miss Grimes," stammered Hampton, "I hope that our intrusion—we did not mean—"

She interrupted, gravely, almost gently.

"You do not need to apologize; you have been kind to me."

"We are here to assure you that we are still your friends," Buck asserted, though all that he said was purely impulsive.

"That's a fact, by hurley!" added Yank.

"Have you heard the latest news?" Tillie asked.

"About your father?"

"Yes."

"We have heard it."

"There is another crime laid to his door. Have you the moral courage to still be a friend of his daughter?"

"You are not charged with any misdemeanor."

"But I am poor and despised."

"When I was a boy," said Yank Yellowbird, gravely, "my poor old mother used ter read in the Bible about One who wa'n't ashamed ter be the frien' o' the poor, or humble, or despised. I consait we ain't no call ter set ourselves up above Him. Little woman, we b'lieve you're deservin' o' sympathy, an' we give it to ye, full an' hearty!"

Tillie burst into tears. She sunk into a chair, and for a while her whole frame was shaken by sobs which bespoke the most powerful emotion.

Yank walked to the window and looked out persistently. Buck changed his position uneasily. He had a dim comprehension of the depth of sorrow which had visited this girl.

She was educated, intelligent, refined and sensitive. Under happier circumstances she might have been a woman courted and admired, but her devotion to her afflicted father had led her in thorny paths. Buck glanced at the mountaineer and saw him secretly brushing his hand across his eyes.

Tillie did not long give way to her grief. She raised her head; she arose and faced the men firmly.

"There is another charge against my father," she exclaimed, "but I swear that he is innocent!"

"Can you prove it?" Buck quickly asked.

"I only wish that I could! No, I cannot prove it, but what occurred last night was wholly unlike him. I doubt if he would have left the jail even if they had set the door wide open; certainly he would never have done harm to the guard."

"Do you know the circumstances—"

"I have heard all. Mr. Hampton, there was more to that affair than we know of. My father had no knife, and he could not have cut his way through the door. There were other men there, and I know it. They assaulted the guard; my father is innocent!"

"But—he has gone away," hesitatingly replied the young man.

"How? Where?"

"That I don't know."

"Nor I, but I wish," and here her voice became a husky whisper, "that I knew him to be alive!"

Both Buck and Yank started.

"Surely," said the former, "you don't mean that you fear foul play?"

"That is exactly what I do mean."

"But who would go to that length? If it was the work of Vigilantes, they would not have injured Foote."

"It was not Vigilantes; it was the work of father's personal, though secret, enemies—perhaps I should say, of the real, would-be assassins of Walter McPherson."

"Little woman," exclaimed Yank, "if you'll give us an atom o' proof ter this effect, we'll hunt the atrocious insex down—we will, by hurley!"

"I can give no proof; I only know father was innocent of both crimes charged to him. Now, for some reason which I cannot understand, the real criminals have taken him away. Pray heaven he is still living!"

"But," replied Buck, reluctantly, "the guard declares that he saw his face distinctly, and that it was he—your father—who committed the assault."

"He was mistaken."

Her confidence was noble, but it was not proof.

"I consait we'll look inter it," said Yank, rather dubiously, but with an emphatic nod of his head.

"Do this, gentlemen, and I will give you my life-long gratitude," Tillie responded, in a trembling voice. "I thank God that there are those who will not lose sight of justice, dark as they may think the prospect. May heaven bless you! Don't think me blind; I wonder at your conduct under such circumstances, and I would not accept your aid, but I tell you solemnly that my father's innocence will yet be proved!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW EPOCH BEGINS.

THREE weeks have passed since the night when Jo Grimes disappeared from the village jail, and once more Big Missouri is stirred to the quick with excitement. And no wonder! The great building of the town, His Majesty's tannery, has been completed, and on this night he is to have his grand "opening."

Great preparations have been made for the event, for it marks the beginning of the new epoch in the Duke's career. Immediately after the affair the tannery is to open, and then the world is to see what Sioux Indians can do in the role of plain workmen.

Already the place is filled with the red-men. His Majesty has selected a certain number to go to work at once, but others are there by invitation to take part in the grand "opening."

It is hoped by all that on this occasion nothing will occur to mar the festivities, as on Zora Pike's interrupted wedding evening. Zora is still Miss Pike, but her lover is no longer confined to his bed.

On the contrary, McPherson's improvement has been so rapid as to surprise all. When he moves about the street, as he does, no one would suppose that he had recently met with such a disaster.

It was found that his wound was even less troublesome than was thought, and this, with his good constitution, brought him through successfully.

His would-be assassin is still at large. This statement applies equally well whether it be admitted or denied that Jo Grimes did the deed.

Grimes has not been recaptured, nor any trace of him found. The efforts to find him have been energetic, and nearly every man of Big Missouri has taken part. With the majority cupidity has been the ruling motive; the sum

offered by Mr. Pike has had great attractions for them.

On the other hand, Yank, Buck and Trail-Lifter have worked with another object—as the friends of Tillie Grimes, if not of her father. Through all the passing days the girl has persisted in her assertion that Grimes has met with foul play, and while looking for Jo Grimes, living, her friends have also looked for Jo Grimes, dead.

Of the three, two were men excelled by none on the border in prairie and wood-craft, yet, like the more selfish searchers, they utterly failed to find a clew.

Jo Grimes seemed to have vanished as completely as the snows of the previous winter.

Thus the days went by. Walter McPherson, steadily gaining in strength, grew to be very much like his old self, and he and Buck seemed to have fully resumed their old friendship. If he or Zora bore any resentment, their manner did not show it.

Of one thing, however, Buck was sure: Zora's bitterness against Tillie had never abated. True, she no longer spoke of her in his hearing, but when others did, her manner was convincing.

Public opinion was as strong as ever against Grimes. It was believed that he had not only shot McPherson but wounded the guard at the jail, and as these two men slowly recovered their neighbors looked at them and longed to find Jo Grimes.

The spirit of lynch-law was abroad.

Buck and Yank did all that they could to find another would-be assassin, and to solve the mystery of the shoes, but they failed utterly. Tommy Bowlegs had disappeared, and Zora and her maid, Nella Bryce, betrayed nothing.

Tillie Grimes was the worst sufferer of those dreary days. If people had scorned her before they scorned her doubly now, and her position was almost intolerable.

Her harshest judges were the women, yet, by a peculiar chance, they could not show the full venom of their hearts. His Majesty's grand "opening" was at hand; they must have something to wear; and as Tillie was the only needle-woman to be hired, they had to go to her!

This employment meant more than money to her. It was in a measure a relief to her aching brain, and she worked until there was good reason to fear that her health might give way.

Buck had become a frequent visitor at the cabin, but he never asked one certain question which was in his mind—What would she do when her supply of work failed? For he felt certain that no one would give her work to do when once the would-be butterflies were properly clad for His Majesty's grand opening.

After that no one would give her work—at least, such was his belief. If Jo Grimes could not be found, his sins could, at least, be visited upon the head of his child. This, if not the way of true Christianity, was the way of the world.

Tillie, however, announced that she should remain in Big Missouri. Despised as she was, she would bear it. If her father lived, she argued, he was sure to seek her when he had opportunity, and if she left the village, he would not know where to find her.

For his sake, she would remain and endure the scorn and derision of the town.

This grew deeper as the days went on, and Buck Hampton now shared it. He and Yank were Tillie's friends. The people forgave Yank, in a measure, but they did not forgive Buck. If he had but known it, he was walking over a sleeping volcano. His visits to the cabin were noted, and only that he had prominent friends, he would before then have been warned to leave town.

Big Missouri was a novel sight this long-to-be-remembered evening—the most remarkable in her history—the occasion of the Duke of Dakota's grand opening.

There was light everywhere. It not only blazed in the houses, but Mr. Pike had caused many lamps to be suspended in the streets. On a small scale, it was a scene of glare and glitter, of splendor and show. The little mountain town had never seen its like.

There were those who wished the night well over. They saw the Indians who crowded the place; dark, stalwart fellows whom no art could make prepossessing to the average eye; and as they glided about under the swaying lamps, uneasiness seized more than one of the white men and women.

There were more Indians than whites in Big Missouri; in case of trouble, the latter would be almost helpless, according to the general estimate.

Buck and Yank went together to the big building which, though soon to be a tannery, was to be a place for merry-making and banqueting that night.

They were early, and only the busy servants and His Majesty were present when they arrived.

"Ha!" exclaimed Pike, "so the company begins to arrive. Good! I accept it as a good omen that the first to come are sensible, practical men. Mr. Hampton, I will frankly say that I hate theorists, doubters and fools!"

"Naturally, Mr. Pike; naturally."

"I claim to be a practical man, gentlemen, and I am going to show the fools and theorists what plain, sensible effort can do; I will show them that Indians can labor as well as any one with a white skin. Before the end of the week all these Sioux I have selected will be laboring, first as tanners, and then as shoemakers. I will give the lie to the doubters!"

His Majesty swung his hand with a profound gesture, and seemed to grow larger, more important and more pompous than ever.

"I consait," remarked Yank, with dry gravity, "that I shall have ter bev sev'ral pair o' shoes made. I wear out a pow'ful sight o' foot-gear in a given period. I've tried shoes, boots, moccasins, ev'rything—even ther Chinese ferry-boats, an' goin' barefoot. I'd liked the last way but I lost so many toe-nails I had ter give it up. When I's a boy I thought nothin' o' bumps, thumps or bruises, but I consait that it hurts me like hurley ter stub my toe now!"

The mountaineer looked at Pike, and shook his head in melancholy regret at this painful fact in his history. Possibly he thought it a blot upon the Yellowbird "pedigree."

"We shall be happy to supply you with shoes, my dear Mr. Yellowbird," His Majesty replied.

"It's right I should patronize the Injuns. Arter all the skulps I've took from 'em, I reelly ought ter buy a pair o' shoes. I wish now I'd saved them sculps—they'd made egregious fine slippers."

The mountaineer winked slyly at Buck. He had never been a collector of scalps, but he desired to throw a bombshell into Pike's camp. He succeeded well. The Duke held up his hands in horror.

"You shock me! It is almost incredible that any one should stoop to such a vice. Yellowbird, when you tore the scalp from the heads of these wronged red-men, did you stop to reflect that they were human beings like yourself?"

"I never mixed reflection an' skulpin'," Yank gravely replied. "When I killed Injuns I jest give myself up ter the hilarious joy of the minute, an' did the hull job in a neat an' scientific way. But you must b'ar in mind this was when I's young—I've reformed sence, an' ef I seen an Injun deprived o' his skulp, I'd feel egregiously cut up—I would, by hurley!"

"I am glad to see that you hold such sentiments, late as you are in feeling them. May Providence forgive you for slaying the helpless red men."

At this moment Jules Le Bland approached. He was apparently in his glory. As a Frenchman he longed for more room than he had at Pike's, in which to show his ability, and he had it now—he was ruler of half a dozen cooks.

"Well, Le Bland," said His Majesty, "how comes on the supper?"

"Famously, monsieur; famously!"

"Good!"

"We shall cover ourselves with glory to-night, sir."

"There's no better way than to appeal to the stomachs of men—that is the way to their hearts."

"You are right, as usual."

"Supper at eleven, sharp, Jules."

"Yes, monsieur."

"And do your very best."

"I will, monsieur."

"I want to feast those Indians so that they will love and honor me for all time. A new epoch in our history now begins!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A NIGHT OF REVILRY.

THERE was but little more time for the Duke of Dakota to talk with his first guests; others began to arrive, and Pike's whole attention was devoted to receiving them, so he could say only a few words to each. In this duty Zora and Walter McPherson took part. A similar invitation had been given Buck, but he managed to decline without giving offense.

By nine o'clock the building was well filled. Men and women of white skin were mixed with men of red skin. There were no squaws present, though His Majesty had expressly asked them to come.

The situation was a new one for the Sioux, and their manner was peculiar. At first they seemed inclined to stand in groups and be silent, but they soon recovered their self-possession and tramped steadily about the various rooms, large and small—all but the dining-room.

Jules Le Bland protected that from invasion.

The women almost without exception shivered when the Sioux approached, and the men began to think that they were parties to a very foolish piece of work. Pike had asked them to leave all their arms at home. Few had complied with the request—almost every man had a revolver concealed about his person—but as the Indians outnumbered them, they were hardly in condition for work as warriors.

Pike tried to make his two elements mix, but here was his first disappointment; they would not mix.

The whites were not especially beset with a desire to be cordial, and the Indians, though they tramped about freely, kept to themselves.

Buck Hampton addressed Nevermiss:

"Yank, I am troubled."

"About what?"

"These Indians. It has just occurred to me that Tillie Grimes is all alone. Suppose some of the red demons should go there?"

"By hurley! I didn't think o' that!" Yank exclaimed.

"They are supposed to all be here, but we have no proof to that effect. I am going to Tillie; if necessary I shall stay there until these savages go away. Pike is to employ only a handful, and the rest will leave Big Missouri after the revelry is over."

"Ye-es," dryly replied the mountaineer, "unless they stay ter take a few skulps."

"Be that as it may, I am going to Tillie."

"Why not bring her here?"

"She wouldn't come."

"I consait you're right, yet I sorter want you back, anyhow; thar is liable ter be an egregious heap o' fun afore the camp-meetin' breaks up. Why can't ye take the little woman ter the hotel, ontill arter the red-skins are gone? Nobody but a cannibawl would turn her away ter-night, ef she is the darter o' Jo Grimes."

"Your suggestion is a good one, and I will try and act upon it," Buck replied.

With this he went away. He was gone much longer than seemed necessary; perhaps because Tillie had been reluctant to go to the hotel. Or he may have found much to say to her. Be that as it may it was a quarter past ten when he re-entered the hall, and Yank, who had been eagerly watching, at once took him aside.

"Lad," said the veteran, "cast your eye on them red insex, will ye? I mean cast it figgerative; of course ye won't chuck it at 'em reelly—you'd be egregious foolish ef ye did."

"What about the red-men?"

"What d'ye think on 'em?"

"They seem to be in high spirits."

"Atrocious high! You never got it nearer. I ain't finikel, an' the Yellowbirds ain't apt ter meddle with tneir neighbors' affairs—leastwise, not when they've got a foot that's a weak sister, an' is all broke up with newrolgy—but I consait them red varmin'ts be in high spirits. D'ye s'pose it's rum or whisky?"

Buck looked sharply at the mountaineer.

"Are you in earnest?"

"To be sure."

"And do you mean to say these Indians are really drinking liquor?"

"Ef they ain't, their breath is mighty deceptive."

"But Pike ordered that no liquor should be sold."

"He don't control all o' the stuff in Dakota."

Buck looked sharply at the Indians. He knew that Nevermiss was not the man to raise a false alarm, and his words were certainly very startling. Even Pythagoras Pike, blind as he was, had realized that the only hope of getting through the night safely was to keep liquor away from the Indians.

To do this, he had strictly prohibited its sale.

When Buck looked the Sioux over so keenly, however, he at once became struck with the force of what Yank had said. He admitted as much, as the mountaineer asked him to mix for a while among them.

Buck obeyed, and then returned with the terse report:

"Whisky!"

"Sure!"

"Yes."

"So be I," Yank declared, with a nod.

"By heavens, this is serious!"

"I consait so."

"If they keep on drinking they may at any moment lose that stoical exterior which, you and I know, is only a mask for hearts as fierce as the tiger's, and the night may end in bloodshed and massacre."

"Sure's you're alive, lad."

"I will see Pike at once."

"Be car'ful how you do it. Don't let the creeturs suspect, or thar may be an egregious diffikilty right away. The weak sister is jerkin' like hurley ter git my legs ter run, an' ef thar should be any reel tribulation, I should be sorry I didn't go it."

For once Yank's humor brought no smile to his friend's face.

Hampton went to His Majesty and laid the case before him, but though a momentary gleam of anxiety showed in Pike's eyes, he was not as much disturbed as the younger man had hoped.

"Probably it is only a small quantity some of them have—I hope that is all. I have seen none of them drinking. I hope they won't destroy my confidence in them?"

He was not the pompous reformer just then—he knew what a demon an Indian in liquor was, and visions of trouble floated across his mind. They were interrupted at this point, and as Pike was obliged to attend to something else, the subject was dropped.

Buck returned to Yank and made his report.

"There is fun ahead," dryly observed the veteran.

"But, surely, these fellows cannot have any great quantity of stuff with them?"

"I consait they'll succeed in gittin' drunk clean through."

"That's a gloomy prophecy."

"Kin you prophesy brighter?"

"No."

Buck's face grew more gloomy as he looked at the tramping Indians. Their stoicism was disappearing. The liquor was beginning to work in earnest; they were growing more free-and-easy in their manner; and a kind of wild lawlessness was perceptible in the glances they now cast about them.

"If the liquor lasts, I pity Big Missouri!" Buck exclaimed.

"I consait it would be bad. You an' me kin look out fur ourselves, but there are women an' children hyar."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Lad, it's ag'in the Duke o' Dakota's orders, but I'd feel a heap safer ef I had my rifle hyar, Thar's a niche over nigh the door whar I kin conceal it, an' ef thar should be a disturbance, I consait that weepoon would come in egregious handy."

The wisdom of this idea was clear.

"Bring mine, also," Buck added.

Yank went away. When he rejoined Hampton, ten minutes later, he announced that the rifles were in place.

While gone he had chanced upon Trail-Lifter, the mute Modoc, and he had revealed the situation to him.

Trail-Lifter, who had no love for the Sioux, had agreed to hover near and be on the alert.

As the supper hour grew near it became more and more apparent that the Indians were getting very much overpowered by the liquid enemy. Some of them staggered; one fell asleep; and now and then a subdued whoop floated upward in a way that none of the whites liked.

His Majesty had made an effort to trace all this liquor, and had spoken to Long Knife, the head chief, but without avail. Long Knife declared that they had brought no liquor; had purchased none; and had drank none.

There was general relief among the white men as the supper hour drew near. If that part of the festivities could be gone through with successfully, there would then be some hope of adjourning, and ending the affair. This did not insure safety, for the Indians would still have the village in which to roam about, but an adjournment might possibly stop further drinking.

Eleven o'clock arrived, and Jules Le Bland promptly announced supper.

Pythagoras Pike led the way to the "banquet hall," as he was pleased to term it.

There was some confusion in getting the Sioux seated, but, at His Majesty's request, Le Bland took charge of the Indians, and his tact bridged over another chasm.

Every one began to eat.

Pike saw with pleasure that the Sioux had good appetites, and he hoped that when they had eaten their fill they would grow more subdued and good-natured. He had Long Knife at his right hand, and he redoubled his efforts to please the chief.

Stubborn as Pike was he knew that drunken Indians were not safe companions, and he wished the "grand opening" safely past.

And so they ate on, and the threatening volcano muttered and grumbled, and no one knew what the night would bring forth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DAVID KENDALL.

THERE were four tables in the supper-room, and they were presided over by Pike, McPherson, Lawless and Kendall, respectively. The first two gentlemen had only Indians for their immediate neighbors. At David Kendall's right hand sat Zora Pike.

Many of those present wondered that Miss Pike and McPherson were separated, but it was His Majesty's wish. If Walter was to be his son-in-law he wanted the Indians to respect and like him, so that he would be a strong helper in the affairs of the tannery and shoe-shop.

His Majesty willed that McPherson should sit with the Sioux, and as Buck Hampton was avoiding all responsibilities in an eel-like way—much to Pike's secret displeasure—the Duke chose his efficient foreman, Mr. Kendall, as his daughter's temporary protector.

After they sat down Kendall for a time uttered only common-place remarks to his fair neighbor. Finally he lowered his voice and said:

"I trust that you are not frightened, Miss Pike."

"I? Why should I be frightened?" Zora asked.

"These Indians are a trifle boisterous."

"I should say so."

"You need have no fear, however. Whatever happens, you will be protected."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"I don't understand."

"You speak as though you expected trouble."

"Indians are not to be trusted, I fear."

"Especially when drunk."

"Yes."

Kendall spoke hesitatingly, and glanced over at the table to where Mr. Pike was explaining some improvements in shoe-making to Long Knife and his fellow red-men.

"Father's plans have in some way miscarried."

"To what do you refer?"

"He tried to keep liquor from the Indians, but you see that they are drunk."

"They are hardly sober."

"Where did they get their liquor?"

"It is supposed that they brought it."

"Supposed! Yes, the word is well used. I overheard Yank Yellowbird say to Mr. Hampton that he did not believe they brought it; but that it had been secretly given them here."

Kendall started.

"By whom?"

"I have no idea. Have you?"

"I confess that I have not. I went around with Mr. Pike, and heard him give strict orders that no one should furnish liquor. His orders have been willfully disobeyed, I fear, and nobody knows what will come of it."

The foreman glanced at Long Knife and his followers, and then added in a lower voice:

"Miss Pike, if those fellows should break out, a terrible massacre would follow."

Zora shivered.

"You frighten me!" she said, changing color.

"Pardon me; I did not intend to do that. Don't be alarmed, Miss Pike; whatever occurs, you will be protected. You have friends who will lay down their lives for you, if need be."

"I am not so cruel as to wish them to do that," replied Zora, smiling once more.

"Oh! but it would be a pleasure."

Zora was human enough to give the speaker a coquettish glance. There are few—very few—persons who are proof against compliments and flattery; and the few exceptions are said not to be women. Zora was a woman, and Mr. David Kendall was a rather handsome man who was not yet old.

"It would be a great sacrifice for a poor object."

"A poor object! Why do you say that? Modesty is a good thing, but it would be useless for Luna, the queen of night, to say, 'I am not bright, beautiful or resplendent!' So with you."

Kendall looked at her in a way which warned her of danger ahead, but she had a thought which made her reckless. Was it better to sit in prim dignity, and listen only to the noisy Sioux, than to listen to the good-looking foreman and forget them for awhile?

"Really, you grow poetic, Mr. Kendall."

"Why not, with such a subject?"

"A poor subject, I think."

"I am afraid that you are too modest by far, Miss Pike. Don't you realize your power? Don't you know that men can see you only to admire? Don't you know that your admirers are legion?"

"Legion! Have I even one?"

It was tempting fate. She caught a flash from Kendall's black eyes, and he quickly replied:

"You have, while I live!"

Zora's eyes fell. She had seen that flash, and it seemed to speak of more than gallantry. She had known that the foreman was a man of strong feeling, and in a vague way she had realized that he liked her. That look seemed to reveal more. Unless she misread it, David Kendall's feelings toward her were more than those of friendship; if he had avowed love for her in plain words, she would not have felt more certain of the fact.

She remembered, suddenly, that she was Walter McPherson's betrothed, and she did not answer.

"Have I offended you?" Kendall added, after a pause, his voice still low.

"No."

It was a natural reply, yet she was displeased with it the moment it was made.

"I wanted to impress upon your mind," continued the foreman, studying her face, "that you have friends who will defend you—die for you, if need be—in case there is any trouble from the Indians."

Zora was glad when, at this moment, Kendall's left-hand neighbor raised his voice in some remark. The conversation was interrupted, and she took good care not to have it resumed. During the next few minutes she devoted some time to thinking of Kendall.

Why had he so plainly shown his fancy for her? Until that evening he had never given her the least reason to suspect anything, but now, when he knew she was soon to become McPherson's wife, he had broken out. His words and his looks combined, had revealed the fact that he cared for her far more than he had any right to do, since only an accident had prevented her from already being a wife.

What did this mean?

He was not a man to lose his head simply because chance had placed them side by side for a time.

Zora was puzzled, but her thoughts were drawn from Kendall for awhile by more pressing events. The Sioux had about satisfied their hunger, but, instead of being more amicably disposed, they were growing more boisterous. The subdued cries of the preceding hour were no longer heard; they had grown to whoops. Occasionally, too, a crash revealed the fact that some article had been broken.

Kendall beckoned to the chief cook.
"Le Bland," said he, "can't you keep those red fellows quiet?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not master here, monsieur."

"You are in charge of the hall."

"But not of the Indians."

"I am terribly alarmed," declared Zora.

Le Bland bowed low, and placed his hand over his heart to bear witness to his veracity as he replied:

"Mademoiselle, I am truly distressed. I only wish I could govern those barbarians, but a regiment of soldiers would be more appropriate."

"Where have they got their liquor from?" continued Kendall.

"Didn't they bring it?"

"I don't know. They've had it, anyhow, and I am afraid of trouble."

"*Mon Dieu*, I hope not. Pray Heaven there may be no trouble while such precious lives are at stake."

Once more he bowed to Zora, but she did not even see him. He went on to attend to his duty.

"Miss Pike," continued Kendall, "may I give you a word of advice?"

"What is it?"

"This is no place for you; those red demons are liable to break forth at any time. Why not return home? I should be happy to conduct you there."

Zora looked him full in the face.

"I will not trouble you, Mr. Kendall. We shall all go soon, and then my father or Mr. McPherson will conduct me."

"I feared that their duties would prevent," he returned, with the utmost coolness. "In any case, it shall be properly arranged."

Once more Zora managed to direct her attention wholly to her other neighbor at the table, and she took care to keep it there until, a few minutes later, supper ended. The various guests arose, and more than one breathed a sigh of relief, but high above all else sounded the whoops of the Sioux.

Pandemonium seemed let loose.

Among the women there were pale faces then, and more than one would have fled from the building had they dared, but nearly all the men were inside—the women dared not go away.

Walter McPherson came to Zora's side. Kendall gave him a glance which did not seem very friendly, and then moved away.

His Majesty was now ready to get rid of his red guests, but he did not see how he was going to do it. Already he was being shown that his proteges were not so gentle as he could wish. On the contrary, he found a lot of drunken vagabonds upon his hands, and as he had already seen that they were deaf to his diplomatic words and arts, he had great fears as to the future.

The Sioux began to swagger about the room and yell louder than ever; and they had a habit of making the white men get out of their way which was not reassuring.

Pike looked almost imploringly at his companions, as though beseeching them to advance some scheme of cutting the Gordian knot, but no one came to his aid.

His mind turned to Yank Yellowbird, but both the mountaineer and Buck Hampton were invisible.

His Majesty turned to Long Knife in desperation, and made another effort. He had enjoyed the evening, and hoped that the Sioux would come again—as he said—and he gave the chief every possible hint that he expected him to take his drunken warriors and go.

Long Knife did not take the hint—nor his leave. He answered insolently, and soon broke away from Pike and joined the men in their reckless movements.

David Kendall came to his superior's side.

"Mr. Pike, I advise you to take our own people and go. There is going to be trouble."

"And leave the Indians here?"

"Can you get rid of them?"

"No."

"Then let us look to ourselves."

"The Sioux are liable to turn this place inside out if we leave them here—perhaps, to burn it down."

"Better that than that lives should be sacrificed. Remember the women; remember Miss Pike. Let us get away while we can."

"I consait it's too late."

The men turned quickly and saw Yank Yellowbird. His face had never been more composed, but it was as grave as the voice in which he added:

"Yas, I reckon the time fur runnin' is past. Them red insex hev guarded the doors, an' we've got ter face the music. I consait thar will be a lively dance."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RED REVELERS' RIOT.

The Duke of Dakota's face lost some of its color.

"I hope you're mistaken, Yank."

"I wish I was," Nevermiss replied, "but facks are ag'in' it. Facks are egregious ugly things. I s'pose," and here Yank leveled his fore-finger

at His Majesty, "that eleven-tenths o' the trouble the Yellowbirds hev had was brought about by facks. They've b'en an awful drag-down on our pedigree."

"But about the Indians. You say the doors are guarded—"

"So they be."

"How do you know this?"

"Buck an' I hev b'en usin' our ears. These red insex hev lost their heads, but there is method—an' whisky—in their madness. They mean ter hev some fun now, an' some on 'em are keepin' nigh the doors so the whites can't git out."

"In Heaven's name, what is their object?"

Pike was thoroughly frightened.

"They want ter run a'fairs fur awhile."

"Is there—is there danger of a massacre?"

His Majesty asked the question in a husky whisper.

"I won't onn'ertake ter say," Yank slowly replied. "Ef they don't git ter goin', all may be wal; but ef they do, nobody knows whar it'll eend. They ain't in a shoe-makin' mood, now."

"All would have been well except for the accursed liquor they brought," declared Pike, rallying to the defense of his favorite hobby.

"Be you sure they brought any?"

"Why, certainly; they didn't get any here."

"I consait they got ev'ry drop on't hyar," Yank coolly replied.

"Impossible, man. I gave orders to Wimbleby and Smith, the only ones who sell it, not to let a drop go out to any one, red or white."

"It ain't them you hev ter be mad at, but at some atrocious insex who has stabbed ye in the back, so ter speak. Mister, thar has been a black sheep in yer flock—an' a mighty black one, too, by hurley!—an' it's him you hev ter blame. Some onderhand critter has furnished the red-skins, an' you see the result."

"Yank, do you know this villain?"

"No."

"Suspect him?"

"No."

The mountaineer answered readily, but his gaze flitted for a moment to David Kendall's face.

"But are you sure of what you say?"

"I be; fur not only has 'pearancees indicated it, but I've heard it from the Injun's own lips."

"Whoever has done it," said the Duke, his pale face flushing, "is a diabolical scoundrel. He must have known what the result would be. Merciful heaven, may these helpless women be saved from the consequences of man's villainy!"

David Kendall glanced at Zora.

"Amen!" he said, huskily.

"You seem wrought up, neighbor," observed Yank.

"I?" Kendall repeated.

"Yes."

"Who would not be?"

"To be sure. Perhaps even the egregious scamp who did the damage is now an artom skeered."

The mountaineer looked Kendall full in the face, but at that moment several Indians approached and the conversation ended.

Pike grew more troubled, and made another effort with Long Knife. He had a fine timberlot north of the village, and with a magnanimous air he told the chief that, as the hour had arrived for an adjournment, he would allow the Sioux to camp in the timber—yes, he would even be glad to accommodate his red brothers.

All this sounded very well, but Long Knife was moved only to fresh insolence. Sprinkling in some choice profanity by the way, he plainly and curtly told the philanthropist that the red-men would do as they saw fit, and that he had better mind his own business.

His Majesty seized another chance to speak with Yank Yellowbird.

"In heaven's name what is to be done, friend Yellowbird? We shall all be massacred if we stay here!"

Nevermiss glanced at the turbulent, yelling Sioux.

"I consait thar is a right good chance on't," he replied. "Thar are two ways afore ye. The red-skins you can't drive off—that's clear. Wal, you kin hold on hyar an' trust ter luck that thar won't be no blood shed, or you kin try ter pass out. I don't see much choice, by hurley!"

"Then we will try to go."

"I'm afeerd they'll bar the way."

"And fight to keep us in, eh?"

"To be sure."

"We must risk it."

Pike glanced at the women and sighed.

His faith in his great scheme had not wavered, but he was not stubborn enough to be blind to the condition of the Sioux. He had never claimed that a drunken Indian could be made into a sober workman, and now all his anger was turned against the unknown person, or persons who had furnished the liquor.

If this trouble could be passed over he was resolved to discover the culprit, and give him a sample of border justice which would not be agreeable.

He called Lawless and Kendall, and gave another direction.

"Pass the word that our party will quietly leave

the building. Say to the men that though their lives, and those of the women, must be respected and defended, no attention is to be given to slight affronts. As they hope to see another sunrise, don't let them anger these red—these Indians."

And His Majesty wiped the sweat away from his forehead nervously.

Kendall and Lawless went about their work. Yank looked after them thoughtfully.

"I hope they'll do their work wal," he observed.

"They will, Yank."

"Glad on't, mister."

The mountaineer spoke dryly, and glanced after Kendall and Lawless in a way not marked with confidence, but he said no more.

The word was passed among the whites, and all was soon ready for the attempt. By direct orders they were to make their movements as matter of fact as possible, and try not to show any alarm, or aversion, in the presence of the Indians.

This was a direction more easy to give than to obey. Nearly all the women already showed alarm, and they had good cause.

No one could deny that every life was in peril.

When all was ready Pike announced to Long Knife that they were going. The chief made no direct reply, but there was a glitter in his eyes which did not match his stoical expression.

The movement toward the door was begun.

Pike had selected Kendall to lead the way. It was not a special honor, for he had asked Hampton, Lawless and Yank Yellowbird to remain, but he believed Kendall to be brave, cool and clear-headed.

The latter advanced to the door.

The crisis was at hand.

Would he be allowed to depart?

The Indians formed in two groups, one on each side of the door, but evinced no inclination to interfere. The four men who had been placed at the front went out quietly, and hope revived.

Its reign was brief.

Suddenly—as suddenly as though they were mere automata—several Sioux sprung forward, breaking the line, and in a moment more the women were flung aside, and the heavy double doors clanged to, shutting out the men who had already passed the threshold.

Then the building seemed to shake with the sound of scores of combined whoops.

The outbreak had come.

The mask was fully thrown off at last.

Hardly had the doors closed before every Indian drew a weapon from under his blanket, and the whites saw themselves surrounded by armed savages, from whom was stripped the last particle of the glamour of philanthropy.

Even strong men changed color then, and the cries of the startled women were like the first sounds of violence and massacre.

Then came a pause, and those at the front looked in silence at the grim, armed savages who stood with their backs to the double doors.

Pythagoras Pike cast one glance at Zora, and his lips trembled, but with a great effort he forced himself to be calm. He turned to Long Knife.

"Chief, what does this mean?" he asked, severely.

"Red-men boss here now," was the cool reply.

"What do you mean?"

"The Sioux are great warriors; their will, law. They say now, whites stay; you stay. Let nobody go near doors; Sioux kill like buf-faloes."

And Long Knife flourished his knife.

"But—"

"There is no 'but!'" shouted the Indian, and he grasped Pike's throat with his left hand, and raised the knife with his right.

A murmur of horror ran through the room.

The shadow of massacre grew darker.

Pike gasped faintly, but one of the other white men sprung forward and seized Long Knife's arm.

The knife was checked just as it began to descend.

That one movement, proper as it was on the part of the settler, precipitated the crisis. The man had hardly checked the chief's arm before he fell to the floor, his head cut through by a flying hatchet.

The inevitable had come.

Blood had been shed, and the sight of it stung the savages to fury. Another yell, longer, louder, more terrible than before, arose as though a horde of demons had been unloosed. Dusky arms swung aloft, and weapons glittered in the light.

Then one Sioux, who spoke good, clear English, loudly shouted:

"Down with them! Kill the cursed pale-faces!"

CHAPTER XXV.

NEVERMISS.

THE cry was enough to rouse the Indians to a high pitch of dangerous excitement at once. A yell followed the words, and the drunken warriors surged forward. The end would then have come quickly, for the Sioux outnumbered the white men, and were not only fully armed but ripe for mischief and slaughter.

Suddenly, however, one voice arose clearly above the babel of sounds.

"Stop!"

It was like a clap of thunder, in the sense that it was unexpected and startling, and every one mechanically paused. Every gaze was turned toward the point from whence came the order.

And this is what they saw:

Towering above the crowd—for they had mounted to chairs—stood three men, and each held a rifle which was leveled toward the Sioux. One touch of a finger, and death would follow.

These men were Yank Yellowbird, Buck Hampton and Trail-Lifter, the Modoc.

"Hold up, ye atrocious insex!" added the mountaineer. "Don't ye think you kin run this 'hull egregious circus, fur you can't. We've got a word ter say hyar. The fust man who tries ter use a weepoon may call hisself a dead critter, right arter. He kin, by hurley!"

A brief pause followed. No other men present could have stayed the red warriors thus, but they knew Yank Yellowbird of old. They feared and hated him. There would have been more braves in the Sioux nation except for him. They had tried to kill him before that day, but he had always outwitted them, and each attempt had left vacancies in their tribe.

A dreaded enemy was Yank Yellowbird, and they had come to believe that it was just as well to let him severely alone.

"Long Knife," resumed the mountaineer, with an air of easy coolness, "I consait you are about as mean a skunk as I ever knowed. Is it Sioux honor ter come ter a man's table an' eat his food—an' you hev an egregious appetite, too—an' then kick up sech a rumpus? You're wuss than the Root Diggers, hy hurley!"

The chief uttered a yell of rage and threw up his arm, but in an instant Yank's long rifle covered him.

"Don't ye do it; ef ye vally yer life, don't ye do it. Death will foller ef ye do!"

Long Knife cowered, but a brave near him made a fierce gesture.

"What!" he cried, "are we Sioux warriors, and let the pale-face cowards frighten us? Chief, give the word, and let us fall upon these white dogs! Leave none alive. Men and women, cut them down!"

These words, spoken in plain English, alarmed the whites afresh, and as a responsive yell arose from the savages, the newly-kindled ray of hope died away in most breasts.

But Yank Yellowbird's voice arose louder, more clearly, more commandingly than ever.

"Hold up!" he cried. "Look an' see what ye've got ter face!"

As he spoke nine other white men appeared by his side, all armed with rifles, and menacing the surprised Sioux.

"Don't git the idee you kin run this circus, ye atrocious insex!" added the mountaineer. "While you red scamps hev b'en fixin' things, we white citizens hev b'en doin' an artom o' work. Now, ef any red chap hyar present acts ugly, he'll git cut down in the flower o' his youth. He will, by hurley!"

Another pause. Those twelve leveled rifles made a power no sane person would overlook, but it was not the rifles that carried the most force.

It was Yank Yellowbird—the magic of his reputation and his name.

He knew the importance of utilizing time; it would not do to give them a chance to recover their coolness.

He suddenly turned his long rifle upon the braves nearest the double doors.

"Stand back, thar!" he thundered.

The Sioux fell back obediently, and with some haste. He was still master there, but he knew it could not last a great while.

"Pike," he continued, "march out yer white folks right away. It's high time they was abed, I consait. I hev knowed female folks ter lose their beauty bein' up late, an' ef thar is one thing I egregiouslly admire, it is female beauty."

Nothing could check his dry humor, but he now whispered to Buck Hampton, who hurried to His Majesty's side.

"Get the people out at once, but without an appearance of flight, if you value your life and theirs!" he said, in a subdued, but intense, voice.

They needed no urging to go, now that the way was open, but to go in an orderly way was quite another matter. Few thought of that. Some rushed like frightened sheep for the doors, and the others followed closely.

Nevermiss swept his keen gaze over the dusky faces around him. He saw nothing reassuring there. Dark and scowling were the faces, and as they saw the haste of the rival party it began to dawn upon them that they were being overawed by one man's presence, and letting slip an advantage which was theirs by force of numbers.

Sullen scowls began to vanish, and in their eyes gleamed fierce hatred, and resolution, and thirst for blood. Nature was again rampant.

Suddenly one evil-looking fellow, who held a hatchet, sprung forward toward a fair-haired girl, the weapon uplifted for a deadly blow. Murder gleamed in his eyes.

Yank Yellowbird saw, and he knew that only

one thing could save her—no one was near enough to seize the savage.

His rifle was turned upon the red murderer with startling quickness.

His finger pressed the trigger.

The report rung out with many a hollow echo, sent back by the huge room, and the girl was saved. The Indian's arm fell, but with harm only to himself. It fell to his side, broken by the passing bullet.

Nevermiss knew what would follow, and he shouted to his immediate followers:

"Back up the retreat!"

And then he sprung down and rushed to where he could be of most service. He took his stand between the Sioux and the retreating whites, and Buck and Trail-Lifter stood beside him, with his other followers at hand.

Then the real battle began.

Uttering wild, discordant, revengeful cries, the Sioux dashed forward in a body. Their hearts were so many infernal pits of passion, and they hoped to beat down Yank and his little guard at one sweep.

He shouted to them to pause, but all in vain. Then he had but one way left. Self-preservation is the first law of nature—the mountaineer gave the order to fire. This time, unlike the occasion when he merely broke an arm, there was no mercy shown the savages. The white men fired when so close that their rifle muzzles almost touched their targets, and when there could be but one result.

Then the weapons were quickly reversed, to be used as clubs.

There was a shock, and it seemed as though the handful of white men would be flung back, but Yank had selected each one because he was able to meet such a crisis boldly and stoutly. They did meet it thus. They showered telling blows freely upon the red warriors—a work in which Nevermiss surpassed all others.

Where he stood there was no wavering of the line. He seemed to be a host in himself. His sturdy blows fell, and men dropped when he struck, while all the while his cool voice arose in encouraging words to his allies.

Trail-Lifter, too, fought like a hero, and Buck Hampton stood up valiantly and never yielded a foot of ground.

The little party held the Sioux back, and the other men and women improved the chance.

The room was soon vacated by them.

Yank cast a glance over his shoulder. Something that he expected was long in coming, and he began to be anxious. The coming was in time, however. A gap had been left by the door, but it was suddenly filled. Some of the men who had gone out reappeared, and each bore a rifle in his hand.

"This way!" cried the mountaineer, in a clear voice. "Range yerselves along in a line. Now, keep back, ye atrocious red insex, or you'll git a volley that will make a mighty tribulation among ye. You will, by hurley!"

The fight suddenly ceased; the Sioux recoiled.

The arrival of the men with the rifles was not to their liking. Not one of their party had brought such a weapon. They had brought only what could be concealed, and, reckless as whisky had made them, they did not care to throw themselves upon those deadly rifles.

A disastrous lesson had already been received. Their fallen braves testified to the white men's prowess.

"Long Knife," resumed Yank, "whar be ye?"

The chief showed himself, sullen, fierce and angry, but not so insolent and bold as before.

"Hev ye got enough?" the veteran added.

"The white men are murderers!" cried the chief.

"Pooty good English you use, but yer voracity ain't wuth a cent. Stick ter facts, Long Knife. You begun this racket, an' ef yer sins have come home ter roost we ain't ter blame, though it is egregious hard on the roost. Now, then, be you willin' ter march out o' the village quiet?"

"The tongues of the white men are forked, and their hearts are full of evil!" dramatically declared the Sioux.

"That ain't ter the p'int. Will you all hustle out o' the village?"

"The red-men have been drawn into a trap, and their braves slaughtered—"

"Land o' Goshen! don't tell any more lies. You're skillful at it, I admit, but yer cause is poor. Save yer talk until ye git back home. The long an' short o' it is, will ye take yerselves off out o' our way, or do ye want another sample o' the way we fight?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

LIGHT FOR HIS MAJESTY.

OUTSIDE the building where this scene was transpiring the women and the few men left to guard them awaited with intense anxiety for the sequel. With them Yank Yellowbird was the hero of the night; they had a vague conception of how much they owed him.

As has already been told, he secretly brought his rifle and Buck's to the building at the first signs of trouble. Later, when he saw that an outbreak seemed to be inevitable, he again went out, saw Trail-Lifter, and directed him to bring every rifle he could get.

Selecting nine of the bravest men, outside those before in his confidence, he told them what he expected, and their rifles were placed with his and Buck's.

It was these men who first fought beside him.

The other rifles had been placed in charge of a trustworthy man, and when the people fled, this man had quickly armed all and sent them back.

Except for this, nothing could have saved the villagers; all, or nearly all, would have been massacred before morning.

They knew this, and as they awaited the result of the parley, Yank's name was upon every lip. His foresight and coolness had saved them all—had baffled the murderous savages for a while. They gave him due praise, but could they have seen him face the scowling savages, talking to them so clearly and boldly, he would have been more of a hero than ever.

Their suspense was not ended at once; the savages were very reluctant to yield a point, but the settlers, armed, were very different from the settlers without a fit weapon.

Suicide was not to the braves' liking, and an attack then would have been nothing else.

They agreed to go quietly away from the village.

The Duke of Dakota had refrained from taking part in the discussion, but his heart was heavy, and he humbly asked Yank to deliver one message. In his name he asked the mountaineer to say that he was sorry that trouble had occurred, and that when the Sioux who were engaged to work in the tannery saw fit to come again they could go to work.

Nevermiss had his opinion on this subject, but he delivered the message.

It met with no direct reply.

Yank did not abate his caution when preparing for the departure of the Indians. He formed his own party outside in such a way that any attempted outbreak could be promptly met, and then Long Knife and his men were told that they could go.

They went.

All signs of intoxication had disappeared, but in place of their turbulent mood had come one more significant, more dangerous. They were quiet, but their faces were scowling, fierce and ominous, and in the glances which they cast at the people they dared not touch, even a dull observer could see that which bore no good promise for the future.

Never did men go more quietly than they departed from the village. Not a whoop nor an act of bravado, disturbed their quiet composure, but Buck Hampton, who was no stranger to Indians and their ways, could not avoid a sigh as they passed from sight.

When would they come back?

How would they come?

The young man looked at the women and half-unconsciously shook his head.

Yank Yellowbird's face was as unreadable as that of a statue. He was as quiet as the Sioux, and no one would have supposed that a care was upon his mind; but when the last swarthy warrior had passed from sight he turned to his own party.

"I consait," he said, quietly, mildly, "that it will be sorter agree'ble ter the women-folks ter hev comp'ny ter-night. I move that they all go ter the hotel, an' pass the rest o' the night thar."

"A good idea," quickly added Walt McPherson.

"We men-folks," continued the mountaineer, "will set around outside an' tell stories. I remember an egregious funny one about a parrot I once had. I'll tell it when the women are in the hotel."

Buck Hampton's heart had never been warmer toward the veteran than then. He knew that Yank was in no mood for story-telling, but, as usual, he was doing all that was possible to cheer and encourage the weaker persons who looked to him for support. Far from at ease was Yank's mind, as his swift, half-secret glance toward the woods revealed.

His suggestions were wise in every way, and they were promptly acted upon; the women went in a body to the hotel, and the men, keeping their arms in hand, formed an impromptu guard.

One of the latter approached Yank.

"May I offer a suggestion?" he asked.

"Land o' Goshen! yes. I don't know any reason why ye shouldn't."

"I ain't the old Injun-fighter you be."

"No; you ain't me, an' I ain't you; 'tain't possible we should git so egregiouslly mixed up; it's ag'in' the law o' natur'. But we're all men o' speech. Say on!"

"Do you think the reds will go away?"

"No."

"What d'ye s'pose they're doin' now?"

"I ree'lly don't know."

"Wouldn't it be well ter have watch kep' over them fur a while?"

The mountaineer smiled slightly.

"Thar is bein' one kep', an' by eyes as sharp as needles, with good, quick brains behind 'em. Hev ye seen Still Tongue, my Modoc partner, o' late? I consait not. Wal, he's got his eyes on 'em, Trail-Lifter has; an' you kin bet he won't let 'em git a p'int on us."

"I might have knowed you had it all settled."

I reckon, Mr. Yellowbird, you never forgot nothing."

"Thar was a time when my mem'ry was on common tenacious, but the atrocious newrolgy has so shook up my system o' late that I ain't what I was. It's a mighty tough thing to be so beset with newrolgy, neighbor; it gives me some mortal severe wrenches at times. Sometimes it helps me. I was once tied ter the stake by Kinanche Injuns, an' the weak sister got skeered, an' begin ter twitch. It was jest enough ter set the newrolgy goin', an' I had sech a spasm that it jerked the saplin' ter which I's bound right out o' the ground, an' landed it an' me on the prairie a mile away; so I easily escaped the red insex."

The Duke of Dakota approached.

The old gentleman's face was pale, and he looked to be in actual pain.

"Yank," he said, almost imploringly, "what will be the result of this?"

"Hard ter say."

"But you have an opinion?"

"Wal, yes, sorter."

"What is it?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I am a man mortally wounded, though my hurt is of the mind, not body. You know my great idea; you know what has occurred to-night. Do you think I can ever induce the Sioux to enter the tannery now?"

His Majesty's voice and expression were too pathetic to admit of a light reply.

"I'll be frank enough ter say that, in all human probability, no Injun will do honest work hyar this year, though the cloud may sorter go over in time."

"This is hard, mountaineer."

"To be sure."

"Everything was working so well, too. It seems hard to see a great idea go to ruin. My plan was a practical one; I would not engage in anything less. I am a practical man, sir, and opposed to theorists and humbugs. I hope to yet see my plan work."

He looked imploringly at Yank, but the latter could not give the desired encouragement.

"All would have been well," pursued His Majesty, "had it not been for the unconscionable villain who stabbed me in the back, by giving the red-men liquor."

"He was a mean skunk!"

"Who was he?"

Yank shook his head.

"I dunno, by hurley."

"I'll give you fifty dollars to learn."

"I'll find out ef I kin, but not fur money; that I won't touch."

"To think that any man should ruin me for the few miserable dollars to be had from the sale of the whisky! My curse upon the stuff!"

"I don't consait it was a matter o' dollars."

"What?"

"I reckon the whisky was *give away*!"

Pike started back.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't I speak plain?"

"No. Yes. That is— Yank, explain yourself. Why should any one *give away* the liquor?"

"Ef it was done, 'twas done ter make demons o' the red insex, an' so upset yer hull plan."

"Done deliberately?"

"To be sure."

Pike brushed his hand nervously across his face.

"Only a bitter enemy would do that. Who hates me so bitterly? Who wishes me so ill?"

"Jest now I don't know, but thar is an egregious heap o' onderhand deviltry, so ter say, in Big Missouri, an' this is off the same piece. I ain't fully fixed the doers on't in my mind yit."

The mountaineer's gaze wandered for a moment to where Bart Lawless and David Kendall stood talking in subdued tones. It was only a glance; then he looked back to His Majesty.

"Yank, I am utterly crushed!" said Pike, in a low, trembling voice.

"Nat'rally, you be a good 'eal upset."

"I see the grandest enterprise of the century tottering to its base. I hoped—I still hope—to raise the red-men from their degraded condition, and now I am stabbed in the back!"

"It was an egregious mean caper, by hurley!"

"Find the guilty person for me, and I will reward you in any way that you ask."

"I'll name the reward now. When ye find the atrocious insex, thrash him like hurley; that's all the reward I want."

"You are the same as ever, Yellowbird, I see. But what of the Sioux? They went away in bad humor. Do you—do you think there will be further trouble to-night?"

"I consait that we must keep ev'ry man o' our outfit armed, an' on watch, until day dawns. I sorter reckon them fellers will worry us ag'in. Mebbe their rifles are hid som'ers nigh. Ef they be, look out fur an attack 'fore mornin'."

Pike breathed a deep sigh, but Yank cheerfully added:

"Don't be cast down, mister. They outnumber us, but I consait we kin fight like cats an' dogs, bein' that our cause is jest. Ter be frank, I reckon we'll hev ter fight 'fore daylight. But don't be skeered; Trail-Lifter is on watch, an' he'll bring us word in time. What now, Jones?"

Yank broke off suddenly to ask the question of a man who came up hurriedly.

"There's trouble at the hotel!"

"What trouble?"

"The women thar say the Grimes girl has got ter leave the house!"

Nevermiss started.

"They do?" he echoed.

"Yes. She was thar, an' they're powerful bitter ag'in' her. They declar' that she has got ter leave the hotel at once!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

TILLIE'S CHAMPION.

THE last revelation fell like a thunderbolt upon two persons who heard it. Buck Hampton had escorted Tillie to the hotel at Yank's suggestion, and he had felt so sure that she was safe, that he had for the time forgotten her in the pressure of other events.

The same statement will apply to the mountaineer.

Buck clinched his hands in indignation as he heard of the action of the women, who had rallied from abject terror to assail one of their own sex, and assert that she must leave the common refuge; but he was surprised at the expression which appeared upon Yank's face.

The mountaineer turned white, and his usual placid expression gave place to one of intense wrath. He turned upon Buck with flashing eyes, and hands which trembled so that his rifle shook in his grasp.

"Thar's work fur you, lad!" he exclaimed. "I can't do it; thar is enough fur me to do hyar; but I consait you kin handle the case. Deal with them women as you would with egregious pirates—cut-throats—murderers. It's a wonder ter me that the good Lord allows sech infernal fools an' fiends ter cumber the 'arth—it is, by hurley!"

Nevermiss struck his hand forcibly upon his rifle-breech, and then added, in a more subdued voice:

"Go, lad; go an' defend that little woman from any, an' all, inemies, an' don't ye show no velvet hand. I consait females ain't got out o' the dark days when folks was tortured ter death, but it might quicken their wits ef we let the red insex come in hyar, skulp-huntin'. I may yit decide ter let 'em come!"

And Yank gave his rifle another blow.

"Surely, you won't do that," remonstrated a settler, who shared the antipathy to Tillie Grimes, but was now alarmed at the precipitation of the women.

Nevermiss wheeled upon him.

"One thing is sartain," the veteran declared, leveling his long finger at the man, "an' that is that no woman, man or child in this town is goin' ter beat Tillie down while I'm hyar. I'm hyar as her friend, an', by hurley, nobody teches her except by walkin' over my dead body. Stick a pin thar!"

The late speaker cowered back, and Yank turned to again address Buck, but the latter was already gone.

He was moving toward the hotel with long steps.

Pierce indignation burned in his veins, and he was anxious to reach the scene and take part. It seemed almost incredible that the women, so lately almost mute with fear, could now be arrayed as heartless persecutors of the unfortunate girl, but he had lived long enough to know that all things were possible.

The hotel was soon reached.

With heavy steps he marched through the hall, but his journey quickly ended. A door opened, and he stood face to face with Tillie, while just behind her were the other women—her self-appointed judges.

Tillie's face was very pale, but it was composed. Not a tear dimmed her great, handsome eyes, but the cold, stony expression of her mouth told of inward emotions which swayed her completely.

Her out-door garments were on, and it was clear that she was allowing herself to be driven out by her unrighteous judges.

Buck caught a flash of joy in her eyes, and then he allowed the breech of his rifle to fall to the floor with a resounding thump.

"Miss Grimes," he said, quietly, "where are you going?"

"Away," she replied, huskily.

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere—anywhere—so long as I go."

"Do you know that it is Yank Yellowbird's order that *all* the women shall remain here to-night?"

Tillie did not answer, and Hampton turned to the other women.

"You knew this," he said. "Why did you allow her to think of going?"

His voice and manner were very quiet, but, knowing him to be Tillie's champion, they knew that a storm was brewing.

No one answered at first, but in a moment a pert voice arose.

"We were sent here, and we decline to associate with *her*!"

"Why?"

"Because she is—who she is."

"And because *you* are who you are," retorted

Buck. "I should suppose that you would be proud of your work—it is so kind, so womanly, so in accordance with the teachings of the Bible!"

The woman flushed.

"You are not my master!" she viciously exclaimed.

"For which, heaven be praised! One thing I am, however; I am one of the men who rule Big Missouri to-night; and I am here with definite orders from Yank Yellowbird. Miss Grimes will remain here!"

"Indeed, I cannot!" Tillie exclaimed. "Let me go. I had rather be alone than to—"

"I understand," Buck said, hastily, as she paused. "Unfortunately, there is no choice in the matter. The hotel is now like a fort, and every non-combatant must be inside. You must, unfortunately, stay here; but I will see that you have a private room."

"If she stays, we won't!" declared the spokeswoman of the crowd.

"No?"

"No, sir; we don't associate with such persons."

"I believe that the imps of Hades do not associate with the angels!" Buck retorted. "Once more, there is no choice. As far as I am concerned, I would willingly let you go out, and fall into the hands of the Sioux, who are in search of scalps, but your husbands, brothers, *et al.*, would not agree. All you women are the same as prisoners here; not one will be allowed to go out. Jones!"

The last order was addressed to the hotel employee, who had just appeared.

"Yes, Hampton?"

"Give Miss Grimes a private-room, and see that she remains undisturbed."

"We object!" cried several of the women, in chorus.

"I am prepared to listen to your objections," Buck grimly replied, "but not while this lady is present. Miss Grimes, promise me to go to your room, and not leave the hotel without notifying me. Will you?"

Tillie glanced at the vindictive faces before her. In contrast to them was Hampton's bold, honest face, and her faith that he would humble them was so strong that she could not avoid enough of natural feeling to desire such a defeat for them.

"I promise," she simply replied.

Buck nodded to Jones, who proceeded to conduct Tillie away with great ceremony. It had suddenly occurred to him that she was ill-used.

Hampton turned upon those who remained.

"Now," said he, coolly, "I am ready to listen—"

"We want to know by what right you interfere here?" interrupted his chief opponent.

"First, by the right of might; secondly, in the interest of justice. You call yourselves women, I suppose, but you must have hearts of stone. Do you know that the Sioux are threatening the town? Would you drive out one of your own sex at such a time?"

"I do not think, sir, that we need argue from that point," was the frigid reply. "We know what the Grimes girl is, and object to keeping her company. She and her miserable father have always been the black spots of our town—one is no better than the other. Grimes now stands convicted of having nearly murdered two men, and we have decided that it was he who furnished whisky to the Indians to-night."

"Has he been seen?"

"No."

"Or heard from?"

"No."

"Then why do you think it was he?"

"Because it was like him."

"Very logical."

"Oh! no doubt you sneer at the idea."

"Probably you think he has been manufacturing liquor somewhere in the woods."

"That point is immaterial."

"Your idea is wild and visionary. There is not one chance in a thousand that he did what you assert. As to his having been 'convicted' of doing harm to McPherson and Foote, no man can be 'convicted' until he is tried. You speak recklessly—"

"That is nothing to you."

"Another logical argument. Let us drop Jo Grimes, however; we were speaking of Miss Grimes."

"Your favorite."

It was a bitter sneer, but Buck bore it patiently.

"She is a young girl against whom no charge has been made except that she is Joe Grimes's daughter—"

"Perhaps you think that we haven't!"

"I have yet to know that you have."

"Well, we want to tell *you*, sir," and the voice of the female judge became surcharged with bitterness, "that we know quite enough about Miss Grimes. We decline to speak plainly. We have always recognized the fact that she was not a fit person for us to know, and we repeat it now. There is not room enough in Big Missouri for *her* and *us*—one party or the other must go. It will not be *us*. And when *she* goes, sir, we think *you* had better go too. We regard you as being as objectionable as she is."

Need we be more explicit? Have we said enough?"

Cold, bitter and vindictive was the woman's voice, and Buck's face grew white with anger.

"Infamous woman!" he exclaimed, "your conduct is almost past belief. Your sex are supposed to possess noble qualities, but you fail to make them manifest. You were born without a human heart. Your insinuations are without a grain of foundation, and I wonder that Providence does not avenge another woman's wrongs upon you now and here!"

He paused, swept his gaze over the circle of faces before him, and bitterly added:

"And you call yourselves women! You insult your sex by having the form of a woman."

There was the rustle of a dress, and Zora Pike came quickly forward.

A deep red spot burned in either cheek, and she showed signs of marked agitation.

Until then she had stood well back, taking no part in the quarrel, but she spoke at last.

"Mr. Hampton," she said, in an unsteady voice, "I wish to say that I do not agree to all these charges. Tillie Grimes and I are not friends, and can never be, but I charge no great crime against her. Do not think that of me; I will only do it when I have proof. I want to do justice to her—and you!"

"So do I!" cried the vindictive spokeswoman, "and I only wish I could. I would send them both out of town in a hurry!"

"Tillie Grimes," answered Hampton, in measured accents, "will not go one moment sooner than her friends think best. She will remain in town; she will remain in this hotel for the present. Yank Yellowbird and I answer for her. Scorn me if you will, but bear this in mind. Yank is the one bulwark which prevents the bloodthirsty Sioux from massacring all of you to-night. Would you have him take Miss Grimes and go?"

"Yes!" shrilly cried the vixen. "He is as bad as you; I despise you both, and the Grimes girl; and I don't care for the miserable Indians—not a fig—Oh!"

She uttered a faint shriek.

There was a crash of glass, and a brawny Sioux warrior, hatchet in hand, bounded into the room like a maddened panther!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BIG MISSOURI'S WILD NIGHT.

THE coming of the Sioux was as sudden as it was startling, but there was nothing supernatural about it. A shed adjoined the hotel on one side, and he had plainly leaped from its roof.

His appearance was enough to strike dismay to the stoutest heart. He was no stoic at that moment, but alive with all the worst passions of men. Like the tiger he resembled, he thirsted for blood, and among these women he seemed to have a royal field.

He had not seen that any man was present, and he had looked gloatingly at the many scalps which, if once obtained, would so ornament his belt. What a harvest! How lucky he was to be before his fellow braves!

The women shrieked in chorus and fell back—all except the one who had so lately been the speaker for them.

She stood like one turned to stone, the mocking, bitter, boastful words frozen upon her lips.

Still the Sioux did not see Hampton, and he sprung toward her with hands outstretched, his eyes blazing, his face like a demon's.

Then the malignant woman stirred to life. She uttered a shriek, and flung herself upon her knees at Buck Hampton's feet.

"Save me! save me!" she wailed, in abject terror.

The hand of the Indian rudely grasped her hair—he went no further. One sweep of Buck's rifle prostrated him on the floor as senseless and harmless as the boards he touched.

But still the woman made her cries. Wringing her hands, she clasped Buck's knees, and repeated her prayer.

"Save me! save me!"

Hampton spurned her contemptuously.

"Oh! I thought you were the woman who was not afraid of the Indians! You just declared that you did not 'care a fig' for them. And now you embrace the knees of the man you despise, and implore him to save you! You are an honor to your sex, but I fear your sex will never realize it. Rise, woman! The Sioux is now helpless!"

As the last words passed his lips the crack of a rifle sounded outside the house.

Close upon the report came two or three more, and then a confused volume of sound in which the whoops of Indians and the shouts of white men could be distinguished. But above all rung the well-known voice of Yank Yellowbird:

"Give it to 'em! Wade in an' cut yer big-ness! I consait we ain't ter be thrashed by no egregious red-skins. Give 'em fits!"

Then other rifle reports followed.

Jones came hurrying into the room.

"The Sioux have attacked the town!" he cried.

"Give your aid here!" Hampton ordered,

with striking coolness. "Bring ropes; this senseless brave must be bound."

His manner had due effect, and as Jones bustled around, the Indian was soon rendered helpless. In the meanwhile, the firing and the cries outside had died away, and appearances indicated that the matter had not been serious.

In any case, Buck believed that he had one duty to attend to before he went out.

The woman who had done the talking against Tillie Grimes, and who had abruptly left off abusing him to implore his protection, had been in the hands of her sympathetic sisters.

She had developed a combination of hysteria and an inclination to swoon, and they had worked over her and called her a "poor dear," a "noble heroine," and other choice names. She had condescended to open her eyes, but lay back languidly.

Hampton brusquely approached.

"Mrs. Torrance, we will now finish our conversation, if you wish," he said.

"Oh! don't worry the poor dear!" cried a bony spinster of uncertain age.

"I want an answer," Buck resolutely replied.

"Do any of you object to the presence of Miss Grimes here?"

Mrs. Torrance raised her head feebly.

"Sir," she enunciated, "I am an honorable woman, and never while I have breath will I consent to rest near the Grimes girl!"

"Again your Christian nature shows itself," retorted Hampton. "I saved your life even when you were vilely abusing me, but you have no word of thanks, nor does your unfounded malevolence toward one of your own sex abate. If all women were like you, this world would be an Inferno. Unfortunately, there does seem to be a good many like you."

He glanced scornfully at the women back of Mrs. Torrance, but Zora Pike came forward quickly.

"This matter has gone far enough," she said, with unexpected firmness. "Mrs. Torrance is wrong, wholly wrong; I do not see how she can so forget the demands of humanity. My father, Mr. Hampton, is the owner, if not the tenant, of this hotel, and I say in his name that Miss Grimes shall remain here, and be undisturbed!"

Mrs. Torrance and her crew looked at the speaker in shocked surprise.

Buck Hampton, however, quickly took her hand.

"Miss Pike, I thank you for this exhibition of generosity. It's no more than right, but it is in marked contrast to the conduct of some others. I am grateful to you, believe me, and I will not forget it in the future."

"Remember, however, I am not the girl's friend," Zora hesitatingly added.

"As you will, upon that point."

The die was cast. The righteous viragos were shocked more than ever, but Zora, as the daughter of the Duke of Dakota, was a power and an authority in the place; they dared not oppose her.

Confident that Tillie would not be molested any further during the night, Buck left the room. All continued quiet outside, and he paused long enough to exchange a few words with Tillie.

She was in the room to which Jones had conducted her, and was much calmer than he had dared hope. She did not manifest any interest in what the women had said, so he gladly avoided any reference to them.

He told her that no one would object again to her occupying the room, and she promised not to leave the hotel without previously informing him.

He then left the hotel. He found the men grouped, or patrolling, as they had been when he left them. There was no sign of excitement. He made his way to Yank.

"What is wrong, Nevermiss?"

"Nothin', hyar," was the quiet reply.

"But there was firing and—"

"Rifle practice."

"On line targets?"

"Sioux!" was the terse reply.

"Explain!"

"Wal, some on 'em stole in on the south side—they never could 'a' come t'other, an' got inter our ranks onseen. One on 'em took a shot at Py Pike, but he missed. He missed egregiously, fur he got dropped right arter. We cleaned out that han'ful—though they *did* fight like hurley! an' now we're ready fur t'others."

"Are our prospects any better?"

"Can't say they be."

"No change, eh?"

"I consait not."

Buck did not answer, and Yank then asked what had been done at the hotel. He heard the story in silence, but when it was told he struck his rifle in the old way.

"Them wome hev got more deviltry ter the square inch—ef you'll overlook the profanity—than any other I ever seen, I vow. Wal, let 'em bowl! I'll stan' up fur Tilhe ag'in' the hull on 'em—I will, by hurley!"

Buck grasped the mountaineer's hand warmly.

"You are a man after my own heart, Yank!" he exclaimed.

"Ef I went ag'in' a helpless woman, I never

should dar' sign my name as Yellowbird ag'in. My fam'ly pedigree is now a good, clear one, but I'd git kicked out o' the gin'logical room ef I was as mean as them women."

"Your head and heart are alike sound, Yank. Do you see Mr. Pike leaning against yonder house? He looks as though his heart had broken."

"'Tis pooty rough on him, but it all comes o' bein' a visionary chap. He says he is practical, but, Land o' Goshen! he ain't nothin' o' the kind. He has the usual experience o' folks that engage in wild schemes; I've tried it, an' I know."

"I once 'prenticed myself ter a 'stronomer, who had set out ter larn me the name an' position o' all the stars in the sky. He divided 'em, I remember, inter corporal planets, asterisks an' settin' lights. That is up'ards o' two thousand o' the twinklin' orbs, ef I remember right, an' only eddicated folks can call the small ones by name. Some on 'em I remember wal, hows'ever. That is Mars, Venus, Serious, You-know, Shebe, Vestize, Pallid an' others, which are of great magnitood."

"It looked ter be an egregious job ter git on familiar terms with all these twinklers, but I went about it right brave. Ev'ry night we went out on the roof o' the house an' looked 'em over. It's my idee they orter all be branded, like cattle on a ranch, ter help beginners, but they ain't. Not much!"

"The perffessor an' me didn't git on very friendly, an' I sorter lost my int'rest arter a bit. One evenin', arter squintin' at the heavens some period o' time, he turned upon me sudden."

"'Whar's Serious?' sez he, mighty sharp."

"'Dunno,' sez I, keerslessly."

"'It's missin', sez he."

"'What on't?' sez I; 'don't think I've stole it, do ye?'"

"'No insolence!' sez he."

"'Same ter you!' sez I."

"'Beware o' my wrath, ef you speak thus ag'in!' sez he, with a snort."

"'I won't be a'cused o' stealin',' sez I. 'Ef you think I've got yer egregious ol' asterisk, look in my weskit pocket,' sez I."

"'You young demon,' sez he, 'I'll give ye a taste o' the 'ile o' birch!'"

"'Bring it on!' sez I. 'Anything as a relief from yer egregious asterisks an' settin'-lights.'"

"The perffessor came right fur me, an' t'uk me by the tails o' my jacket, an' he was precedin' ter lay it onter me with a birch stick; but I concluded I'd got all the edication nee'sary in 'stronomy, so I kicked his telescope off'n the roof, an' then slid down the water-spout an' escaped."

"That's what come o' my indulgin' in foolishness, an' it's the same with Py Pike. He tried ter civilize the atrocious red insex, but—"

Yank suddenly stopped, and, seeing that his gaze was fixed in a certain direction, Buck looked and saw Trail-Lifter gliding forward with quick, light steps.

He came up, and then his fingers began to flash over and across each other in the mute language so well known to Nevermiss.

The message was brief, but it made Yank draw his tall, bony figure more erect.

"I consait the crisis is at hand. He says that the Sioux are preparin' fur a reg'lar attack, hev'in' got rifles—I thought likely they had theirs hid back som'ers—an' thar is lively work ahead. Pass the word fur ev'ry man ter be on the watch. Men, bar in mind what you're about ter fight fur—ef the reds win, it's sure death ter us all!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE WILD NIGHT GROWS RED.

YANK YELLOWBIRD at once began his preparations for the defense. The testimony of Trail-Lifter showed that the Sioux were coming in one body; that they were not intending to make any strategic move; but, coming in a mass, they intended to overwhelm the defenders by mere force of numbers.

Nevermiss moved nearly all his force forward to the edge of the village. There he proposed to make a stand, and do all possible damage; and, when they were driven from that position, fall back to the vicinity of the hotel.

There they must fight to the last; if necessary, they must die there.

No one thought of deserting the women.

Up to this time Pythagoras Pike had been a spectator, but he now picked up a rifle and approached Yank. His face was pale, but he showed no sign of fear.

"Place me!" he briefly directed.

"Be you goin' ter fight?"

"Yes."

"You needn't ef—"

"There is no reason why I should be excused. I have a daughter."

"I glory in yer pluck, by hurley, an' ef you wish you kin stay nigh me. It's about time fur the first blow."

Yank peered into the darkness.

A light, lithe figure suddenly approached; it was the Modoc again, back from a last scout. He communicated with Yank, and, though they

now had no light, the latter seemed to understand him easily.

The word went along the line that the Sioux were almost at hand.

A period of utter silence followed; then dusky figures were seen stealing through the gloom. Yank shouted a challenge in the Sioux language—it was answered with a war-whoop.

Then the dusky figures came bounding forward like so many panthers.

"Stiddy, all!"

Yank Yellowbird's cool order sounded encouragingly. The men grasped their rifles tighter, and shut their teeth with grim resolution.

Then the mountaineer gave another order:

"Fire!"

A sheet of flame; a roar of rifles. A score of bullets went whistling toward the enemy. A wild, discordant chorus of yells; some of the Indians were down, but those who survived were as eager for the fray as ever. They only quickened their pace.

But Yank had been prepared for them.

The men who had fired dropped down to the ground, and those who were obliged to do so, began to reload. Then back of them a perfect hurricane of bullets sped forward. The few repeating-rifles in the party had begun their work.

Louder, wilder screeched the Sioux, and a return volley came clattering against the houses. Window glass fell rattling in a dozen places, and all, combined, made a Babel of sound.

But the scene changed again. The Sioux were at hand; the white men sprung up and met them; the fight became hand-to-hand. Then revolver, knife and clubbed rifle became factors in the fight. The whoops of the Indians mingled with the defiant shouts of the settlers, and the women in the hotel clasped their hands, fell upon their knees and raised their voices in prayer.

Once more Yank Yellowbird showed his prowess, but there were others not far behind him. Where Buck and Trail-Lifter fought the Indians fared badly, and even His Majesty won glory.

His strength was great, and, now that he had given himself up to the work, he showed that he was no mean opponent.

Suddenly a peculiar shout rises above all other sounds.

It is a signal from Yank.

Instantly there is a backward movement of the defenders—not a disorderly flight, but a cool, systematic retreat. Like so many phantoms they recede.

Then the Sioux yell in triumph; they believe that the rout is complete. They spring forward again—but many go to their doom.

There is another roar; the report of many rifles combined; and the savages fall in numbers. Deadly, indeed, is that volley, and even the fierce courage of the Sioux is daunted. The pursuit is checked.

Once more has Yank Yellowbird's strategy been shown; he had reserved those men as a third division for that very crisis, and their work had been well done.

A few moments later all the defenders were assembled near the hotel. There they proposed to make the final stand, and save the women and children or die in their defense. There was a lull, and Buck made his way to Yank's side.

"Have you any orders for me, mountaineer?"

"No; we kin only wait fur them."

"Don't you fear that the torch will be applied to the village?"

"I do," Yank readily answered. "It'll be a merakle ef it ain't done."

He glanced uneasily at His Majesty's great new building, and slowly added:

"I wish we was sitedated so we could protect the property, but it can't be done. Ef we separate our party it means ruin an' death ter all. We're outnumbered still, ye see. We kin only wait hyar."

"Big Missouri is doomed."

"I consait it may be."

Yank removed his hat, and agitating his thin hair with his free hand, added in a low voice:

"Did you keep yer eye on them men?"

"Lawless and Kendall?"

"To be sure."

"I was too busy elsewhere."

"I managed to git a look at 'em now an' then. I tell ye I'm more suspicious on 'em than ever. They didn't do no great heap o' fightin'; I'd a'most swear they fired twenty foot above the enemy's head."

"It will not be a waste of time to watch them."

"I consait not."

Pythagoras Pike advanced, accompanied by the chief of his culinary department, Jules Le Bland.

"Yellowbird, you will excuse me," said the Duke, "but Le Bland has worried me about a suggestion."

"What's the matter with him?—afeerd his pots an' kittles will git broke?"

"*Mon Dieu!* do not scoff at me, monsieur!" exclaimed Jules, imploringly. "I am only a cook now, it is true—ah! unromantic calling!—but in *la belle France* it was not so. The blood of a count is in my veins, Mr. Yellowbird."

"Land o' Goshen! why don't ye send his blood back ter him? It may git spilt an' lost, ter-night. But I ain't got no bone ter pick with ye, Jules; you fit like hurley in our skrimmage. Pike, what's the worry?"

"Le Bland fears that the torch will be applied."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"Le Bland may be right."

"Yellowbird," continued His Majesty, and his face seemed to grow haggard, "what if the new building should be burned?"

"Do ye know any way we kin save it?"

"Can't we charge the Sioux?"

"Stop an' think, Pike. The red-skins outnumber us a good bit, an', in ekul fight, ought ter lick us. Ef we separate our force, it means death ter us; while as fur takin' the women ter the tannery, it can't be done. Even ef we got 'em thar, the buildin' ain't one ter be defended easy."

"According to that," said the Duke, wiping the perspiration from his face, "we must have the tannery unguarded, and trust to luck that it will not be burned."

"I consait it's tough fur you," Yank sympathetically replied, "an' I don't want ter be thought harsh. You may select five o' the best men in town, an' leave it ter them ef we kin softly leave our present persition."

"No, no; it is not necessary. My judgment told me, before, that it would be madness to divide our force, or leave here."

Pike turned away as he spoke, and Buck Hampton saw a big tear roll down his face.

It was a severe blow to the old man.

His pet scheme seemed utterly ruined.

There were those who saw worse than this in the aspect. According to the existing state of affairs, Big Missouri was wholly at the mercy of the Indians.

They had only to apply the torch freely, and in the morning the village would be in ashes. The defenders could only hope to save the hotel, and the few buildings near its walls.

Every one watched the tannery with painful anxiety. The Sioux were roaming about; they were masters of the village; and, knowing as they did the place that huge building had in His Majesty's affections, it would be strange if they did not fire it.

Suddenly a murmur arose from the watchers.

A tongue of flame had appeared in the darkness.

It increased in size, mounted higher and began to cast its light around. The first building—a small house—had been given to the flames. That it was the beginning of a general conflagration no one doubted.

It stood near the tannery, and, as the blaze increased, its light fell upon the larger building and showed the Indians hurrying about like disturbed bees.

Yank Yellowbird's hands worked nervously upon the lock of his rifle.

"By hurley!" he muttered, "I wish I dared charge the atrocious insex—I only wish I dared."

He was thinking of the women.

A massacre might follow any desertion of them, temporary though it might be.

Twice the mountaineer raised and lowered his rifle. Buck Hampton had rarely seen him so moved; he could dimly imagine how the veteran was affected.

A hand was laid upon Yank's shoulder. He turned quickly, almost impatiently, and then stood dumfounded at what he saw.

He stood face to face with Jo Grimes!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PICKED PARTY'S CHARGE.

THE mountaineer started back in surprise. No one had been less in his mind than Grimes, and it was so with all his companions. They had been looking so attentively at the scene before them that Grimes had come to their midst unseen.

Yet, there he stood, looking, if possible, paler than ever, as he certainly was more ragged and shabby. His once neatly-mended garments were in rags.

Yank was not pleased to see him. It was like going into a lion's den for Grimes to come to Big Missouri, and the mountaineer had a momentary fear that the citizens would fall upon him with lynch-law intentions.

Nowhere else could he be in such danger.

Grimes, however, was cooler than Nevermiss had ever seen him before, and he quietly said:

"Reinforcements have come, sir."

"They hev?" uttered Yank, with a start.

"Yes. Look here!"

The mountaineer looked, but in the crowd failed to distinguish any new face. There, however, was Trail-Lifter, and despite the darkness he managed to convey a message to his old ally. Yank's face brightened, but, seeing that Grimes had not yet received attention from any one else, he hastened to address the fugitive:

"You've done wal, mister; you've done most mighty wal; but let me whisper a word in yer ear. This town ain't a safe place fur you."

"I know it only too well."

"Then why be you hyar? Don't mistake me, mister—you've brought us help, an' I thank ye hearty; but you must consider yer own case fu'st o' all."

"Not so, Mr. Yellowbird."

"What then?"

"You forget Tillie—my child!"

Grimes spoke in a trembling voice.

"True, I was forgittin' her. Do ye mean—"

"I shall at once take her and leave this accursed place, never to return," was the bitter reply.

"Leave now?"

"Yes."

"Land o' Goshen! the Sioux will gobble ye."

"I'll risk it."

Buck Hampton moved to the speaker's side.

"Let me add my entreaties, Mr. Grimes," he said, persuasively. "It would be madness to ask your daughter to go now. For her sake, be prudent."

"Poor Tillie!" uttered Grimes, with a sigh.

"I hev the idee," quickly added the mountaineer. "You must not think o' goin'—it would be her death an' yours. Take my advice. Buck shall conduct ye ter the hotel, an' see that ye have the room next ter Tillie's. Very few folks know you're back; in this crowd, faces ain't looked at sharp. Go ter the hotel an' keep quiet. Thar is no other way to do. Will ye go, mister?"

"But—"

"Don't stop ter argue—go, go!"

Yank was looking anxiously toward the fire as he spoke. The house was now wrapped in flames, and sent up a light which was as startling as it was brilliant.

Buck renewed his arguments, and Grimes wavered. His only thought was of Tillie. He had come back for her sake, but he was ready to listen when her few friends told him that there was the utmost danger in trying to take her away from Big Missouri at that time.

He soon agreed to go to the hotel with Buck, and remain in concealment for awhile. No reference was made to the crimes with which he was charged, and he showed no fear whatever.

Buck, on the contrary, was exceedingly ill at ease, and fearful that Grimes would be seen by those not his friends.

It was a singular position in which he found himself placed. Walter McPherson was his friend, yet he was trying to save the man alleged to have shot him.

Yank saw the two start away, and then, after a word to Trail-Lifter, he called the attention of the men around him.

"Give notice hyar, all on ye!" he cried.

"Thar's a turn o' the tide in our favor. A friend o' ourn has brought us reinforcements; all bordermen, Injun-fighters an' true men. Thar ain't but nine on 'em, but that's enough ter settle one pint. I wanted egrejiously ter charge them red-skins, an' now I'll do it."

There was a murmur of approval.

"Buckle on yer armor, lads, fur thar will be some tremenjus hot work. We've got ter run a fiery gantlet, as I might say. I want 'bout fifteen on ye fur the charge. Who volunteers?"

Almost every man stepped forward.

"That's the true speerit!" exclaimed the mountaineer, his eyes glistening. "I'm glad thar is sech grit carousin' in ye—reminds me o' the time my great-grandfather, David Yellowbird, fit a big scamp named Golathy, or some sech name, an' slew him with a sling. I'll pick out them I want, fur I consait the rest ov ye had better be able-bodied men. I've got the newrolgy, which is infarmity enough fur the hull crowd. Hyar come the rest."

Trail-Lifter returned, followed by nine stalwart men. Grimes could never have brought them into the village unseen, so good were Yank's arrangements for defense, but the Modoc had been their guide.

He, as well as Yank, knew several of them.

Nevermiss shook the hand of the foremost, and then explained what he wanted of them. They caught at the chance; they were reckless fellows, though honest enough, and a charge upon the Sioux was just to their liking.

Yank selected fifteen men from among the villagers, and the picked party of twenty-five were ready.

Buck returned just in time to be left in command of those who remained. He asked leave to be in the charge, but the mountaineer wanted a clear-headed man to be in command during his absence.

He selected Buck, and the latter yielded.

The picked party moved away, and those left by the hotel waited with the keenest anxiety. It was believed that the fate of the town depended upon the expected charge, and Yank and his brave followers had gone to attack a force five times their own number.

Their only hope lay in taking the Sioux by surprise.

Le Bland, the French cook, touched Hampton's arm.

"This is a painful crisis," he observed.

"Yes."

"Do the ladies know what is being done?"

"No; of course not."

"Certainly, monsieur; it would pain them greatly. *Mon Dieu*, it is hard that the estimable

creatures should suffer the anxiety—the sorrow, of this night!"

Buck was too much interested in watching for the first sign from Yank's party to make reply, and he thought no more about Le Bland.

The light of the burning cottage now illuminated one-half of the village. It shone upon the Sioux and showed them going and coming about the scene. They were in and about the tannery, but there was no sign that the torch was to be applied to it.

But where was the picked party?

From the moment they vanished in the darkness they disappeared entirely for the time. Buck watched to see them stealing upon the Indians through the circle of light, but nothing of the kind was seen.

Suddenly the scene changed.

The Sioux became more than ever like bees.

They stirred into instant activity; they grasped their weapons, as though to meet a foe. Their gaze, however, was directed toward the point opposite the watchers by the hotel. What did it mean?

Then upon the air broke a ringing cheer. Buck realized the truth—Yank had led his force around to the rear to take the Indians by surprise.

How they shouted! Loud, clear and resolute came the cheer. Then their rifles spoke almost as one; a well-directed volley which made the Indians recoil. Some of them went down never to rise again.

Another moment and the picked party appeared. Darting into view from the end of the tannery, they rushed upon the Indians. Buck Hampton's blood thrilled at the sight. The headlong speed of the bordermen matched their wild, reckless daring.

At their front bounded Yank Yellowbird, as agile as a man of half his years, and his tall figure seemed taller than ever before.

How different he was then from the mild, humorous Yank of happier moments.

The shock came; the picked party were in the midst of the enemy; they were giving blow for blow, and moving like a resistless flood.

There was resistance, but it seemed to lack all system and determination. Perhaps the Indians believed that they were attacked by all the settlers—certain it is that the blow fell so suddenly—so powerfully, that they could not withstand it.

They turned and fled.

Then the air trembled with the cheers of the white men. Those at the hotel shouted, and the victors did that and more. They dashed in pursuit of the fugitives, and accelerated their flight with blows, rifle-shots, and their fierce cries.

Like so many pigmies, the fierce Sioux were swept from the village.

Another period of time, and then the picked party returned. Yank was too wise to pursue far. The runaways would soon discover that only a handful of men had pursued, and to fight them in the woods meant ruin.

Nevermiss led his heroes back. He was wiping the perspiration from his face with a handkerchief none too clear, but his manner was as cool as ever.

"I consait we licked 'em like hurley!" he was saying, "an' now we want ter keep our grip. It'll never do ter let 'em git control hyar again. I intend ter form a reg'lar army, an' keep the atrocious insex out altergether."

Buck had been anxious to congratulate the mountaineer, but suddenly Jones, the man in charge of the hotel, appeared beside him, wild-eyed, panting and blood-stained.

"Great heavens!" cried Buck, "what is wrong?"

"Zora Pike and Tillie Grimes are gone!" brokenly gasped Jones.

And then he staggered and fell to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MISSING MAIDENS.

FOR a moment there was utter silence.

The startling appearance of the messenger, and the startling announcement he had made, might well amaze and stupefy any interested person. But Yank Yellowbird was quiet only a moment.

He sprung forward, knelt, and shook the messenger by the shoulder.

"What's that?" he cried. "What do ye say, man?"

Jones looked up feebly.

"They're gone!" he muttered.

"Gone whar?"

"I don't know; they took them away."

"Who did? Speak out, Jones, an' give us news afore it's too late."

And once more Yank shook the wounded man.

"It was the masked men; I don't know who. They were too many fur me, an' they knocked me over. Go ter the hotel—they'll tell yer."

The last words were spoken even more faintly, and then the messenger's head sunk lower. He had fainted.

Yank quickly arose.

"Come ter the hotel!" he exclaimed.

He addressed Buck Hampton, and checked words to the same purpose which were on the younger man's lips. They ran to the hotel together.

When they entered they saw a scene of confusion and distress. Some of the women were running about aimlessly; others stood wringing their hands, and all gave evidence of some calamity in their every look and movement. Yank noticed that Jules Le Bland was there, too, and even then found time to wonder at it; but the French cook came striding toward him.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur!*" he cried, "Miss Pike is gone!"

"Why in hurley didn't ye stop her?" Yank demanded.

"I wasn't here."

"Who was?"

"The ladies, monsieur."

Jules waved his hand toward the frightened group.

"Glad somebody was hyar. Now, then, step forruds, somebody with a tongue, an' lemme know all about this egregious rumpus."

One of the women advanced.

"What's happened, mum?" Yank added.

"Oh! Mr. Yellowbird, there were some dreadful masked men come and they seized Zora Pike and took her away, and Jones tried to save her, and they hit him over the head with a club, and their faces were covered with masks, and poor Zora was helpless, and we were all stupefied with fear—"

The speaker bade fair to go on forever with her connecting "ands," but the mountaineer interrupted:

"Where'd they come in?"

"I don't know; they suddenly appeared in this room, and—"

"Why did they take Zora any more than the rest on ye? D'ye know?"

"No. I hadn't thought of that, but now that you mention it, I'm afraid they singled her out on purpose."

"What about Tillie Grimes?"

"We looked out the window, and saw that she was being taken away too."

"Which way did they go?"

"There."

She pointed toward the north.

It was toward the Sioux camp.

"Come with me, lad," directed Nevermiss, quietly, as he turned to Hampton.

He went to Tillie's room. There was nothing there to give any clew to the mystery. They opened the door of Grimes's room, and found him in the deep sleep of great physical weariness. Plainly, he was unconscious of all that had occurred, and they let him sleep on. They returned to the corridor.

"What do you make of it, mountaineer?" Buck asked, anxiously.

"I consait no exact opinion can be give, but I sorter hev an idee. I ain't so blind but that I know there is a man besides Walt McPherson who likes Zora atrociously. It wouldn't s'prise me ef this idee was a clew ter the case."

"Who is the man?"

"Dave Kendall."

"A man I don't like."

"I should hope not."

"But the second man?"

"What second man, lad?"

"If you argue that Zora has been captured by a disappointed lover, what about Tillie Grimes?"

"Your wits are right about ye," commented Yank with a nod. "The second chap—wal, hev you noticed that Kendall an' Bart Lawless are much tergether?"

"Yes."

"Now you hev my idee."

"But I have never seen any evidence to show that Lawless cared for Tillie Grimes."

"He's sly, Lawless is; he's egregious sly. I never ketched his drift, myself; ef I had, I'd 'a' stopped him, o' course. Hows'ever thar is a good 'eal goin' 'round Big Missouri that is sly, mysterious an' skulkin'. I've got an inklin' o' some on't, an' the rest is wheelin' inter line. This ain't ter the pint, though."

The mountaineer thumped the breech of his rifle upon the floor and added:

"Them gals must be brought back."

"I propose to go at once," Buck quickly replied.

"You shall; you're jest the man for't. I can't go; my place is hyar; I'm needed. Fur the same reason your party must be small, but I consait a few bold, cool men will be better'n a heap. What d'ye say ter Walt an' Still Tongue besides yerself?"

"Excellent."

"I am givin' ye a treasure in the Modoc. He can't be ekulled in border-craft 'round hyar."

"His only drawback is his inability to speak."

"I reckon he'll find a way to make ye understand, lad. Now, come on; we'll start our rescuers right off, quick."

They left the hotel and returned to the defenders. They found Pike and McPherson talking together, and wholly ignorant of what had occurred. When told of Zora's abduction, they were greatly excited and alarmed, but Yank quieted them down somewhat with a few cool words.

Search was made for Kendall and Lawless, but they were nowhere to be found.

Taken in connection with Yank's suspicions, this was a significant fact.

His Majesty was a devoted father, and he had a good many suggestions to give—in some of which his old obstinacy showed—but the mountaineer overruled all other points, and proceeded to get his party started.

Trail-Lifter, when summoned, consented to act as leader of the rescue-party, acquiescing in Yank's decision without argument. The three young men looked to their weapons and left the village.

From the moment of starting the Modoc's cunning was manifest. He moved like a shadow, taking every precaution, but not delaying for a moment. He moved rapidly, and while he went his keen gaze was never at ease.

Both Buck and Walt felt renewed confidence in him.

They had just passed the last of the houses when the forward movement was checked. The Modoc paused, and then all saw a man coming toward them.

It was Jules Le Bland.

"Gentlemen," he said, lightly, "rest by the way for a moment. Can I go with you?"

"We are to go alone," Buck answered.

"But will not more be welcome?"

"I think they need you at the village."

"But consider your mission."

"How do you know what it is?"

"Ah! monsieur, don't I know that it is to rescue Miss Pike?"

"Be that as it may, our party is selected," Buck impatiently replied.

"Don't say that. Give me a chance to fight for the lady. I am only a paid servitor, but my duty is plain."

"As we have definite orders, I will point out your duty. Yank Yellowbird has ordered that we three go alone; so the place for you, Mr. Le Bland, is with our friends yonder."

He pointed to the village.

"*Mon Dieu!* you are severe!" cried the Frenchman.

"We have no choice."

"Then you absolutely refuse?"

"We are obliged to do so. No doubt you would be a zealous helper, but our party cannot be made larger. Pray go back to Mr. Pike. Another attack is expected, and you will be needed."

"Ah! my unhappy lot; you fill me with sorrow, monsieur. Still, I will obey. Adieu, messieurs, and may your mission be successful!"

Le Bland waved his hand and was gone, moving toward the village.

"What do you make of him?" McPherson abruptly asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Is the fellow crazy?"

"I think not."

"I've noticed a good many queer things about him. It may be his impulsive, excitable way, however."

"True."

Hampton answered mechanically; he was revolving in his mind an idea which he did not see fit to mention just then.

Their progress had been resumed, and the wood was soon reached. It was dark and, near them, silent, but Trail-Lifter knew that the Sioux were not far away. It had been an idea accepted by all that the kidnappers had gone at once to Long Knife's camp, and there they proposed to look for Zora and Tillie.

The Modoc led the way to within a hundred yards of where he supposed the red warriors to be; then he left his companions and went on alone. Buck and Walt lay down in the bushes to wait as patiently as possible.

It was a pause of painful interest.

Walt was beset with the greatest anxiety concerning Zora, and Buck was surprised to see how much interest he had in Tillie Grimes. Misfortune seemed to follow the girl continually, and as he thought of her in new, but unknown, perils, his blood thrilled with strong and overmastering emotions.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TOMMY BOWLEGS REAPPEARS.

AFTER the departure of the rescue-party, Yank devoted his attention to the force remaining under his command. There was painful anxiety in Big Missouri that night, and he shared it fully; but he bore the anxiety as easily as he did the fatigue of his constant exertions.

His step had never been lighter, or his manner more cool and genial.

"Don't git cast down an artom!" he advised, cheerfully. "We're runnin' a fiery gantlet, it's true, but I consait we shall come out all right. I've alays been lucky in runnin' the gantlet. Once, down in Arizony, the red-skins drew up over three million o' their pet braves, a small tribe o' squaws an' children, an' an egregious lot o' dogs; an' all ter run me down. The chase lasted seventeen days—no; it was only a fraction over sixteen, I b'lieve," he amended, pausing, and conveying the idea that correctness was the one thing he wished for above all others; "but I know I got atrocious hungry afore it ended. I won that race, an' I consait we shall this. Don't be cast down!"

His cheerfulness was a tower of strength to them, and even those who had blamed him be-

cause he had been Tillie's friend, were now his stout admirers.

He had resolved to hold the village at all hazards, and he went from point to point like an officer visiting the outposts.

Fresh trouble was in store for him, however.

Jones, the hotel employee, had somewhat recovered from his injuries, and, being of a resolute nature, had resumed his position; but, an hour after the would-be rescuers left, he reappeared to Yank, looking excited and alarmed.

"There's trouble at the hotel!" he gasped.

"Land o' Goshen!" ejaculated the mountaineer, "what in hurley is up thar now?"

"It's about Jo Grimes."

"What about him?"

"The women have told the men he was thar, and half a dozen on 'em are in the hotel, vowin' they will give Grimes a thrashin'."

"They be, eh?" cried Yank, as he started for the hotel. "They'll git some o' their own medicine ef they ain't car'ful, an' it won't set wal. By gracious, I never see sech an oneasy place as Big Missouri is—never! Jest wait until our fiery gantlet is run, an' you'll see me streakin' away so fast that the slack o' my coat will stan' out abind me like the tail o' a comet!"

He reached the hotel and rushed in.

He was none too soon.

Excited men and women were in the main corridor, and he saw Jo Grimes in their midst. Harsh hands were upon the old man, but he stood erect and calm, never struggling or remonstrating.

The voices of his enemies arose in all keys from the deep base of the men to the shrill treble of the women, and all in threats.

"Horsewhip him!"

"Duck him in the river!"

"Lynch him!"

These and like cries fell upon the ears of the prisoner, but he gave no sign of fear.

"Let me at him!" howled a big rough in a red shirt. "I'll hammer him all out o' shape! I'll knock him—"

The threat died away upon his lips. The scene had abruptly changed; the fellow was lying upon his back, and Yank Yellowbird stood over him like a Nemesis. One motion of the veteran's muscular arm had stretched the ruffian out upon the floor, and that, too, with a shock that made him think that all his bones were broken.

"Did I hear ye observe," asked Yank, in the mildest voice imaginable, "that you wanted ter lo some knockin' an' hammerin'?"

"Not ter you—not ter you!" gasped the bully of the previous moment, turning pale with craven fear.

"Because ef ye do, I'm the man fur you ter practice on—I be, by hurley!"

"No, no, Mr. Yellowbird," whined the fellow, "I don't mean any harm, rec'lly."

"Git up!" the mountaineer ordered.

The fallen man obeyed.

"Git out o' this hotel!"

The object of his wrath slunk away obediently, and then Nevermiss turned to the other men. His face was calm and placid, and except for a slight twinkle in his eyes, he showed no anger, but the way in which he thumped his rifle upon the floor was very suggestive.

"Men," he said, quietly, "did I set you ter guard the village, or loaf 'round in hyar?"

Some of the men quailed, but, as usual, even in a bad cause, a spokesman was found. A fellow stepped forward and doggedly replied:

"There was no need on us outside, an' we came hyar ter protect our wives an' darters."

"Oh! ter help 'em hide?" asked Yank, ironically.

"There are other dangers than the Injuns."

"Name 'em."

"When we heerd that Jo Grimes was hyar, we saw our women in danger—"

"From what?"

"From him!"

The speaker pointed to Grimes.

"Oh! from a feeble old man, who was fast asleep, eh? Eggregious danger, I consait."

"He might wake up, an' what did he do ter Foote an' McPherson?"

"Tain't proved that he did anything."

"What in thunder do ye want, in the way o' proof?" demanded the spokesman.

"More than *your* word, Nate Rugg—more than *your* word," steadily replied the mountaineer.

"I am not going to waste words here," interrupted Grimes, with a kind of quiet hauteur, "but I will say that I am alike innocent of having done harm to McPherson and Foote. I never touched the guard at the jail. I was taken from my cell by masked men. When led out, the guard lay in one corner of his room; I could not then tell whether he was injured or asleep. I did not raise my hand against him."

"I suppose ye didn't cut the lock off'n your door?" bitterly scoffed Rugg.

"I did not; the masked men did it after they had unlocked the door with the regular key—Foote's key."

"A likely yarn."

"It is true," Grimes baughtly replied.

"An' whar hev you b'en, sence then?"

"The masked men took me to a cave two

miles away, and there I have been held prisoner ever since. One man stayed with me, but, to-night, the Sioux frightened him away and I escaped."

"Yes, an' brought hyar the reinforcement that saved the town," added Nevermiss, quickly. "Only fur that I consait half this town would 'a' been in ashes now. That's what ye owe ter Jo Grimes; he saved the town fur ye, by bringin' help, an' now you're howlin' ag'in' him like coyotes. Pooty men *you* be, by hurley!"

Yank shook his finger accusingly at the rebels, and though Nate Rugg was not influenced, some of the other men were.

One of them at once stepped forward.

"I hope I ain't a hog," he said, "an' I allow we hev been hasty. Thar is law in Big Missouri—or will be when the Sioux are licked—an' that's the thing ter deal with Jo Grimes. We ain't the ones ter do it, an' I ain't the will, ef he brought them reinforcements. Gents, I propose that we git out o' this."

His words met with such general approval that no more was said against leaving. Rugg looked sullen and ugly, but he saw that public sentiment was against him.

Led by the last speaker, the rebels left the hotel and went back to their posts.

"Now, then, Grimes, I consait you can safely go back ter your room," said Yank, cheerfully.

The old man did not reply at once. He disdained to refer to his late persecutors either in way of complaint or arraignment, and it was clear that his thoughts were elsewhere.

"I'd like to go to my child—Tillie—if she is not asleep. Mr. Yellowbird," he humbly said.

"Not fur the world!" hastily replied the mountaineer, who, seeing that he was still ignorant of Tillie's fresh misfortune, was anxious to keep him so. "The gal is asleep, o' course, an' she is so eggregiously worn out that it would be downright cruel ter wake her up."

"Oh! I wouldn't do that," as quickly returned Grimes. "Poor Tillie! if she can get any rest, she shall certainly have the chance. You are quite right, Mr. Yellowbird, and I will return to my room and stay until morning."

He turned away as he spoke.

Yank thought best to see him in the room, and did so. The old man's manner impressed him strongly. It was more quiet and subdued than usual, and anything but like that of a criminal. Strong as appearances were against him, Yank found it hard to believe that he had fired the cowardly shot at Walter McPherson.

Having disposed of Grimes, the mountaineer retraced his steps.

A fresh surprise awaited him in the corridor.

Reaching that point he found four men standing by a fifth, who lay prostrate upon the floor. Yank pushed forward. There lay Tommy Bowlegs, the vagabond Indian, and he seemed little better than a dead man. His face was smeared with blood which had flowed from a severe wound on his head, and his eyes were entirely closed.

"Hallo!" quoth Nevermiss, "hyar's another o' our leadin' citizens cut down in the flower o' his youth—melancholy spettacolo!"

"We found the scoundrel among the fallen Sioux, Yellowbird. There ain't a shadow of doubt but he fought with them, against us."

"Still alive, ain't he?"

"Yes; but bad off. We think he's shamming insensibility."

"I'll see if I kin make the atrocious insex talk."

Yank knelt beside the vagabond, but at that moment there was the rustle of a woman's dress, and some one imperiously pushed the veteran's hand aside.

It was Nella Bryce, Zora Pike's maid.

"Let him alone!" she cried, flashing her eyes angrily at the mountaineer.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RED BRAND.

YANK YELLOWBIRD looked in wonder at the excited girl.

Excited Nella Bryce certainly was; her eyes flashed, her hands trembled, and as she knelt by the side of the vagabond Indian, she looked like a feline animal defending its young. Considering that the person to be defended—if any defense was needed—was in this case only Tommy Bowlegs, her conduct seemed beyond comprehension.

Yank could not comprehend, and after a few moments' reflection he slowly asked:

"What did I onnerstan' ye ter say?"

"I told you to let him alone!"

Short, sharp and decided was Nella's voice.

"Land o' Goshen! I wa'n't hurtin' the crittur!"

"I don't intend you shall."

"Gal, do you know who he is?"

"Yes."

"He's Tommy Bowlegs, vagabond, thief, assassin—an' now a'cused o' fightin' with the Sioux last night."

"There ain't any doubt of it," corroborated the man who had brought that news.

"What of it?" retorted Nella.

"Gal," you perplex me," admitted Yank,

who thereupon fell to stroking his beard, zealously. "Why in hurley do you take up fur Tommy Bowlegs?"

"He's a man, ain't he?" demanded Miss Bryce, quickly and sharply.

"Wal, I dunno," the mountaineer dubiously returned. "I consait thar is room fur argyment on that pint; he seems ter me more like an eggregious snake—he does, by hurley!"

Pausing for an instant, he looked more fixedly at Nella, for whom, it will be remembered, he had no love, and seriously added:

"No relative o' yourn, is he?"

"Of course not."

"Lover?"

"Sir, do you want to insult me?" cried the lady's maid, indignantly.

"Not much, I don't; I'm only arter facks. Fav'rite amusement o' mine; I s'pose I've c'lected more'n a million facks in my life. All the Yellowbirds took ter the business; the family pedigree is full o' sech instances. My uncle, Adam Yellowbird, the oldest known member o' the family—he lived at the Garding o' Eden, an' married Eve Smith—was powerfully given ter gittin' facks, though I must say he got condemn'dly laid out by 'em."

"Why do you talk such nonsense?" demanded Nella. "Go away, and leave this man to me."

"What d'ye want o' Mr. Bowlegs?"

"I will care for him."

"The care he needs is the hangman's."

"You are inhuman!"

"Jes an artom, mebbe; the eggregious newrolgy has peskily warped my nat'rally amiable nature."

All this while there was a war of glances between the speakers. Yank's suspicions were out in force. He had a settled opinion of Bowlegs, and strong opinions as to Nella Bryce. The part which he knew each had played in the days when Walter McPherson was shot—not to mention what he suspected—recurred to him now forcibly, and he saw great possibilities in the fact that the girl had become the vagabond's champion.

"My only objiet with Thomas," he mildly continued, "is ter open his lips an' make him talk!"

A new light flashed into Nella's eyes.

Was she startled—frightened?

Unless Yank's eyes deceived him, the proper answer was—Yes!

"The man is severely wounded, perhaps dying," she declared, but her voice was not steady.

"All the more need o' makin' him talk."

"But he is unconseious."

"I doubt it. We think he's shammin', an' I consait he is. I reckon a good thrashin' would loosen his tongue, an' thar are some things I want ter ask him about; things not connected with our fight ter-night."

"Common humanity demands that you let him alone!" exclaimed Nella.

"Justice requires that I make him talk."

The mountaineer's voice was still mild, but he watched her keenly. Her eyes flamed at him belligerently. She was angry, alert—yet frightened.

"I appeal to these gentlemen," she said, and waved her hand toward the spectators.

"Ter save a criminal from justice?"

"To save a wounded man from persecution."

"Land o' Goshen! I ain't no prosecutioner, gal. All I want is ter hev Bowlegs explain about a sartain tragedy I consait he is knowin' to. What 'tis, I needn't say; it may be the shootin' o' a man, or some small matter, like a pair o' lost shoes."

Nella's eyes fell; her face grew pale.

"Of course," pursued Yank, "you are not knowin' to it. The shootin' o' men, or findin' o' lost shoes, is nothin' ter you—nor ter me, nor Walt McPherson."

He was following the thread relentlessly, and Nella Bryce's lips were effectually closed. She shivered like one very cold—although the night was warm—and seemed turned to stone.

"Do you object ter my course *now*?" asked the mountaineer, after waiting in vain for her to speak.

She arose, but her gaze dwelt persistently upon the floor.

"No," she replied, almost in a whisper.

She turned away; she brushed her hand across her eyes as though she was dizzy, or blind; she went from the corridor with slow, heavy steps, so unlike her usual elastic movements.

Yank Yellowbird's mind was in a state of confusion. He was beset with mystery and perplexity. Nella had become more than ever an object of suspicion, but Yank was not sure as to her position.

Clearly, she had never interfered in behalf of Tommy Bowlegs from a motive of sympathy. She had been afraid that he would be led to tell something—a certain secret—and she had only desisted when it became clear that she could not continue without great injury to herself.

What was this secret?

Yank's half-veiled remarks to her had revealed his own idea of the matter; he believed that it referred to the attempted assassination of Walter McPherson.

The mountaineer looked down at the vaga-

bond, and his thoughts ran something like this:

"Hyar is the man who fired the shot at Walt, but he did not do it fur himself. He was hired. If it was only an ordinary case, with Bowlegs as principal, Neila Bryce would not be interested. Now, it ain't my idee at all that she hired him ter shoot Walt, or wanted him shot. Who did? I'll be thrashed ef I know."

His mind wandered to Kendall and Lawless. These men he had never liked, but, despite the cloud which had fallen upon them, he did not connect them with the shooting of Walt McPherson in any way.

"It's egregious funny," he muttered.

At that moment the doctor arrived.

He pronounced Bowlegs really senseless, and desperately wounded, so Yank was compelled to give up all immediate designs upon him. He directed that the vagabond be put to bed and given the best of care, and then went back to the defenders of the village.

The situation had not changed. It was now the general opinion that the Sioux would not attack again during the night, but the watch was not relaxed for a moment.

Once more Yank directed all his attention to this duty, and went about encouraging the men, and satisfying himself that they were attending to duty. Thus the night wore away.

The dawn of day found the situation as peaceful as ever, and no evidence that an attack was intended. The Sioux were still in the wood, but keeping close to camp. Many a sigh of relief went up as the citizens saw that, thus far, only one building had suffered.

Pythagoras Pike came to Yank, and actually forced a faint smile to his face.

"It still stands," he observed, pointing to the tannery.

"To be sure," the mountaineer replied.

"I could almost be content were it not for my poor Zora."

"Cheer up, Duke, cheer up. She's liable ter be brought in safe, any minute."

His Majesty shook his head.

"I begin to fear that Hampton and his party have also come to grief."

"I don't think it. It takes an atrocious good man ter beat Trail-Lifter, the Modoc; an' Buck an' Walt ain't children, by no means."

"I hope your opinion is well founded."

"Sartain; we all hope so."

"But I haven't your faith," Pike confessed, with a sigh.

"Don't borry trouble, anyhow. Time enough fur that when—Hullo! thar's a hoss loose, an' comin' this way full speed. Why, ain't it Zora's white mare?"

A small, beautiful horse, almost milk-white in color, was dashing toward them.

"Yes," His Majesty answered; "it is Queenie. I dare say the Sioux stole her last night, and that she seized the first opportunity to escape. Her intelligence is wonderful—I'll wager something she stops here when she sees me. She is a regular pet, and will go and come at Zora's command like a well-trained dog. Queenie!"

The mare had abated her speed, and at sound of the Duke's voice, she came to a halt almost beside him. Yank laid his hand upon the rein—for she was bridled—and saw that she was trembling violently.

"The little beauty seems badly skeered," he remarked.

His Majesty did not answer; he was gazing wildly at the mare. Upon her side he had seen marks of red, as though of blood, and as he gazed, these marks resolved themselves into letters, and the letters into a word. And the word, redly-written, was this:

"HELP!"

Strange and ominous brand!

His Majesty grasped Yank's arm, and pointed in dismay to the red message on the white mare's side.

"My God!" he gasped, "what does that mean? She comes from Zora, and it is an awful message she bears!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MODOC TAKES THE TRAIL.

TRAIL-LIFTER conducted Buck and Walt to a point near the Sioux camp, and then left them while he went forward to reconnoiter.

When once he was moving alone, with no one to hamper him in the least, the Modoc's caution and skill became something remarkable. He moved toward the camp like a phantom. Now he glided from tree to tree; then he crouched behind some cover and watched and listened; anon he crept panther-like across some open space.

In this way he reached a point where he could see the Indians.

They had builded a small fire, for some reason unknown, and around this they were to be seen. The Modoc had expected to see some signs of a consultation, but in this he was wrong.

It was a quiet camp; half of the Sioux were lying down, and the others were almost as still. There were none who were conversing.

The spy looked for the missing girls; he saw them not. He looked for white men; not one was visible.

Had he come to the wrong place to get tidings of Zora and Tillie?

Five minutes passed. He was reluctant to go away, believing that there was the proper place to seek for clues. And his patience was rewarded. Out from the darker shadows came a single figure; it approached the fire; the face of a white man was revealed.

Trail-Lifter's eyes glittered; the new-comer was Bart Lawless, the Basilisk.

The man moved freely and fearlessly, and no one challenged him or opposed his progress. He approached one of the Sioux, who stood by a tree, as though in meditation. It was Long Knife. Then the chief and Lawless shook hands, and the character of the Basilisk was settled. Trail-Lifter was not surprised; like Yank Yellowbird, he knew the man of old.

The Modoc meditated for a moment; then, leaving the tree which had concealed him, he made a partial circuit of the camp.

He had thus reached a point near where Lawless had entered the camp. Believing that his stay would only be temporary, he proposed to see the renegade when he returned. If desirable, he would follow where he went.

Several minutes passed.

During this interval, Trail-Lifter discovered that the Sioux were not trusting all to chance. They had guards posted to protect them from attack. One of the latter was very near, but the young spy looked at him with disdain.

He cared nothing for the man, and had no fear of capture.

For the time he had lost sight of Lawless, but heavy steps sounded and the renegade reappeared. He was alone. He moved out of the camp, and his manner led the spy to believe that he was not in the best of humor.

As Trail-Lifter had expected, he left the village and moved toward the northeast—a course which would take him to high, rocky land.

The Modoc followed with catlike caution.

Occasionally Lawless paused and looked around, as though instinctive caution, rather than fear of pursuit, led him to use such measures. He saw nothing; young as he was, the Modoc had gone too often upon the trail to be caught off his guard.

Lawless left the forest proper and began to ascend the high land. There the trees dwindled to shrubs, and rocks seemed omnipresent. It was a wild region, but one as well known, in general, to the Modoc as to any one else.

He wished then that Buck and Walt were with him, but he wished in vain.

The renegade continued his journey for several minutes, until well above Big Missouri. The hotel in the village looked like a house illuminated for some scene of festivity.

Lawless paused by a swift, wide stream, which was a tributary of Racer River. It dashed down the mountain-side, leaping many a fall. By one of these stood Black Hills Bart. He stopped longer than usual, and seemed very anxious to avoid notice.

Seeing nothing suspicious, he suddenly passed through the veil of falling water at one motion.

Trail-Lifter's eyes flashed. Trusting to the darkness to conceal his movements—he was very anxious not to lose sight of Lawless—he flashed forward to the falling water. He entered it at once, but not as Bart had done; he stooped low and crept, rather than walked, in.

No challenge followed his bold movement, and in the darkness he could see no human being. He listened, but could only hear the roar of the fall.

Determined not to be baffled, he moved forward again. The bed of the brook was free from large stones, and above the level of the water. There was a space of at least five feet between the falling water and what seemed to be a solid ledge behind.

Suddenly the Modoc paused again. The darkness had been broken; a dim light fell upon the sheet of water. This could have but one explanation, and he crept forward again. A few feet further he had advanced, and then, beyond a point of rock, saw Bart Lawless again.

He stood waving a pine-torch over his head to increase the blaze. This done, he advanced once more.

They were now in a cave. Rock was everywhere—above, beneath, around them. As well as the Modoc had known the mountain, he had never heard of the place before.

He followed patiently, coolly, skillfully.

At last Lawless paused and bent down. There was a peculiar sound, and Trail-Lifter saw him draw a plank up, as from an abyss. And one was there in point of fact. The young Indian started as he realized the truth. A chasm crossed the way they had been traversing. This had been spanned by a plank, to be used as a bridge, but by withdrawing it when he had passed over, Lawless had cut off the chance of further pursuit.

Trail-Lifter's hand fell to his belt, where he kept his revolver, but there were two reasons for not using it. He would not shoot Lawless down without provocation, and a shot might do far more harm than good.

Lawless laid the plank aside and then resumed his journey.

The young Indian looked further.

Seeing a gleam of light ahead which did not seem to proceed from the Basilisk's torch, he

went to the left, to see if he could get a better view. He reached a sloping ledge; he climbed it; he turned and saw a scene of interest.

Perhaps seventy yards beyond the chasm was a well-lighted recess among the rocks. Torches, thrust into crevices, threw plenty of light around, and within that circle sat three persons.

Trail-Lifter's eyes blazed as he looked at them.

"One, a man, was David Kendall. The others were girls—Tillie Grimes and Zora Pike.

The Modoc had not trailed in vain.

He crouched upon the ledge and watched eagerly. He saw Lawless join the trio. Kendall greeted him in a friendly way. Lawless spoke to the girls. Tillie treated him with silent contempt, wholly ignoring his presence, but Zora talked, and plainly made an appeal to him. All things went to clearly show that the girls were prisoners, and Yank Yellowbird's theory was thus proven true.

Kendall and Lawless were revealed in their true colors.

The spy did not long delay; his duty was then clear. He descended from the ledge and quietly left the cave. Passing the curtain of water he shook himself with an air of indifference and then went rapidly down the hill.

He reached the place where he had left Buck and Walt, meeting no one on the way. He found his white friends grown very impatient, but the news he brought was enough to revive their fallen spirits.

All started for the cave.

Trail-Lifter directed their course past the edge of the village, and there secured a stout board with which to bridge the chasm. They then went on rapidly. The fall was reached in due time; they passed through and entered the cave.

The Modoc then ascended the ledge, but the torches beyond the rocks had burned so low that their light was of no use; he could not tell whether the quartette were in their former places.

There was but one way to do—they must advance. After some labor the board was laid across the chasm, and then they passed over in safety. Trail-Lifter led them on, and they were soon close to the point of interest. The torches burned dimly, but no human figure was to be seen.

Glances of disappointment were exchanged, but no one ventured to speak. Trail-Lifter motioned to his companions to secrete themselves, and then himself glided away in the darkness.

Buck and Walt stepped behind a point of rock.

"I fear we are too late," the latter whispered.

"They may be sleeping near."

"True, but I think they have left the cave."

"I will admit that such is my own idea, but we will hope for the best."

Five minutes passed, during which time not a sound broke the stillness. None was to be expected from the Modoc, who could move like a shadow, but they had hoped for some sign from another quarter.

Five minutes—and then Trail-Lifter returned with a free, bold step. Plucking one of the torches from its crevice, he swung it into a blaze.

"They are gone!" exclaimed Walt.

The Modoc nodded.

"Are you sure the cave is vacant?"

Another nod.

"Then, by heavens, we are badly beaten. Where, now, is hope for Zora?"

"And Tillie!" thought Hampton, but the words were not spoken.

Trail-Lifter's eyes flashed, and he made several gestures which conveyed resolution, if nothing more, to his companions. Then he moved toward the entrance and they followed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CAPTIVES.

THE night was drawing to a close. One hour more and the darkness would pale, as though the night was growing gray with age. Then would come the light of day.

Four horses were moving slowly along the mountain-side. Of these, two bore riders. It would have been the same with the others, but the rough and dangerous way forced their present masters to walk, and not only search for a passable course, but guard against the chasms which could not otherwise have been seen.

These travelers were Lawless and Kendall, with Tillie and Zora as prisoners.

Lawless led the way. He was a practiced borderman, but on this night he found his skill severely tested. Several times he nearly fell into a chasm, as he moved slowly along, and his patience fared even worse; it deserted him entirely, and he did not scruple to indulge in a running commentary whereof profanity was the principal feature.

He considered it imperatively necessary that they should put as many miles as possible between them and Big Missouri before daybreak, but Fate, itself, seemed to have conspired to harass him.

At last he came to a sudden halt.

They had entered a gulch which proved to be

a *cul-de-sac*, and as he saw the steep rocks confronting him he broke out into a fresh tirade.

"I'm tired of this," he added. "We are wearing out both the horses and ourselves, and not gaining enough to reward us. I reckon we may as well stop until morning, right here. One hour of daylight, in this villainous place, is worth twenty-four of darkness."

"But they may overtake us," suggested Kendall.

"I have but little fear of that," Lawless replied. "Every man is needed at the village; I doubt if we need fear pursuit even to-morrow. Long Knife will keep them busy—you remember that he told me he should continue the siege."

"I haven't much faith in Long Knife."

"Nor I, for that matter; but he has men with him who are tigers to fight."

"Well, have it as you will; camp, if you wish."

"I do."

Lawless turned quickly to the captive girls and cut the thongs which secured them; he ordered them to dismount, and they obeyed in silence.

The horses—one of which was Zora's white mare, Queenie—were then turned loose at the end of the *cul-de-sac*. Tillie and Zora were directed to sit down on the ledge, and as they could not do otherwise, they obeyed.

The men went aside to consult.

Since they became companions in captivity, not a word had passed between the girls. Tillie was glad that it was so. She regarded His Majesty's daughter as her bitter enemy, and mutual misfortune had not softened her resentment. Had she known that Zora had spoken in her favor at the hotel she might have been a trifle less bitter, but she did not know. Of the two, her resentment increased; she interpreted Zora's silence as indicating scorn that would not be turned aside, and she hated her cordially.

What was in Miss Pike's mind Tillie did not know, but it was Zora who broke the silence at this point.

"Where is this going to end?" she asked hesitatingly.

"I don't know," was the terse reply.

"I shudder to think of the future."

No answer.

"I have thought David Kendall an honest man, but it proves to be very different. I fancy you do not like Lawless."

"We are not choosers," Tillie curtly replied.

"Have you any hope of rescue?"

"No."

"Surely they will search for us."

"For you—yes. For me—no."

"We are together."

"It is not my fault."

Brief and hard was the voice of "the Grimes girl."

"Tillie," said Zora, even gently, "let us lay aside our differences, if we have any, until this trouble is past. We are helpless girls, exposed to great peril—"

"I will meet mine without asking for help!" curtly returned Tillie. "I am accustomed to trouble; I can bear this."

She turned her back partly toward Zora, and the approach of Lawless and Kendall prevented further conversation. Lawless paused before Tillie, and spoke to her in a voice far gentler than was usual to him.

"I would like to speak with you aside, Miss Grimes. Go far enough so that we can speak in confidence; I ask no more."

Tillie hesitated only for a moment. Then she arose and followed him. He went but a short distance; then paused and addressed her with marked outward respect.

"Miss Grimes, I dare say you feel very bitter toward me, and I admit that it was an uncere- monious thing to kidnap you, but my motives were good. I love you, and I wanted you for—"

"You have told me all this before."

"Weeks ago—yes. Affairs have changed since then, however, and you need a friend, helper, champion."

"I will not trouble you, Mr. Lawless."

Tillie's voice was pacific, but firm.

"Pardon me—not if I can prove your father innocent of shooting McPherson?"

The girl started violently.

"Can you do that?" she asked tremulously.

"Perhaps."

"If you know who the real criminal was—"

She paused; he heard her breathe unnaturally; then she impetuously added:

"If you know so well, perhaps I can guess the criminal's name."

"Do you suspect me? If so, you wrong me. Why, my devotion to you led me to try and clear your father in the face of what seemed direct evidence. Do you remember that, when McPherson was shot, I argued that a woman had done the deed? I never believed it, but I pressed the theory until I learned that the smeared bullet-patch fell from Kendall's pocket, innocently enough; and that the supposed-to-be suspicious footprints were, really, Zora Pike's own."

"You dropped the theory quickly."

"I did; first, because I knew it would not hold; secondly, because I wanted to help your father, with the object of winning you—I admit that I was wholly selfish—and I determined to hunt down the real assassin. I can now name him, and if you will be my wife, I will clear Joseph Grimes."

"Who is the real criminal?"

"That I will tell after we are married."

"Perhaps it was some one hired by you to do the deed?" Tillie suggested.

"It was not; I swear it. I had no hand in the murderous work."

"Was it Kendall?"

"It was not."

"Was it any one hired by him?"

"It was not."

"Does he know who fired the shot?"

"No. I alone possess that knowledge."

"And you can bring the real criminal to justice, and clear my father?"

"Yes."

"May I guess who fired the shot?"

"If you wish."

"Was it Tommy Bowlegs?"

"No."

"Brown, the gardener?"

"No."

"Was it any one who lived in Mr. Pike's house?"

"No."

"Was it Fitch, the owner of the gun which they say father used to fire the shot?"

"No."

"Then I don't know who it was."

"Of course you don't. Besides the assassin, I am the only person who knows who *did* fire the shot."

"Was it one of the men who kept father prisoner in the cave?"

"No."

"I am utterly puzzled, then."

"Of course you are. I got the knowledge by the merest chance, and it was a very lucky one for your poor old father. He has been badly used, and it will be a happy day for him when he can hold up his head among all men, free from all charges. I will enable him to do this as soon as we are married. Another scheme I have in mind. When we are settled down I am going to give him a place in the world fit for him—among books, educated men, and those who know not his past. All this will I do if you will marry me, Tillie!"

It was a crafty appeal, and it lost nothing in the delivery. Lawless spoke gravely, persuasively, tenderly; and, knowing the girl's devotion to her father, he knew how it would affect her.

Tillie trembled violently. The darkness hid the pallor of her face, but he could hear her draw her breath pantingly, and her hand was clasped over her heart.

Still, she did not speak, and when the silence had grown painful to him, he added:

"What is your answer, Tillie?"

She started like one aroused from an unpleasant dream.

"Don't ask me now!" she huskily cried.

"Give me time!—give me time!"

Lawless smiled complacently.

"Certainly," he gracefully replied; "I do not want to be severe. Return to Miss Pike and— Stay! I will not again bind your bonds, if you will agree to make no attempt to escape."

"I can't give that promise," Tillie firmly replied.

"I will take the risk, and trust to your honor."

It was a singular subject for him to mention, but she made no reply. He conducted her back to Zora's side, and after a few words with Kendall, her hands and Zora's were left unbound; then the two men again took up their position near the mouth of the *cul-de-sac*.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

NEITHER Tillie nor Zora seemed disposed to renew the conversation, and for several minutes there was silence in the *cul-de-sac*.

It was rudely broken.

Suddenly a revolver shot rung upon the air; a wild shout followed; and then came several shots in succession. Tillie and Zora sprang to their feet. A brisk exchange of shots was taking place where they had last seen their captors. What did it mean? Did it indicate help for them?

A man staggered toward them.

His course was aimless and erratic, and when a few feet away, he dropped and lay without motion. At the same time the firing ceased.

"In heaven's name, what does it mean?" asked Zora, trembling violently.

Before Tillie could answer, another man approached, and they saw that it was David Kendall. He was wiping his forehead, as though to brush away profuse perspiration.

"Do you know what has happened?" he asked.

"No," Zora replied.

"Bart Lawless is shot dead!"

Tillie dropped back upon the ledge. Lawless dead! And only a little while before he had told her that he was the only man who could ex-

plain how Walter McPherson had been shot, and expose the real doer of the deed. The revelation fell with such force that she could not utter a word. She did not welcome release from captivity if it deprived her of all chance of seeing her father's name cleared.

Zora, however, quickly asked:

"Shot by whom?"

"That I don't know; some ruffians, strangers to me."

"Why did they attack you?"

"I suspect that it was to rob Lawless and me of our prisoners. They did for Lawless, but fared ill in trying. There were three; one is dead, just over there, and the others ran away."

"One lies there," corrected Zora, pointing.

Kendall started, and then went to the man they had seen fall. He came back wiping his hand.

"Dead!" he said, tersely.

Plainly, the death of Lawless troubled him. He went back to the mouth of the *cul-de-sac*, while, just as he did so, Zora's white mare approached. The animal, singularly intelligent naturally, was very affectionate and obedient, and had been taught tricks like a circus-horse. It now rubbed its nose against its mistress's hand, and, feeling touched by the exhibition of love from her only remaining friend, she caressed the mare's beautiful head and neck.

Anon, Zora had an idea.

Knowing Queenie as she did, she had thought of a way by which she might possibly get word to her friends if only she had pencil and paper. She had them not, and when she asked Tillie, the latter replied that she had none, without asking why.

Baffled, Zora devoted several minutes to vain regrets, but her idea haunted her mind. Presently she had a second idea which seemed to help the first, but it was one which made her shudder and recoil. She tried to discard it, but, remembering what was at stake, grew stronger and tried to overcome her aversion.

Arising, she sauntered to the fallen man, followed by the white mare.

She remembered how Kendall had found it necessary to wipe his hand after examining the fallen man—and she knew why.

Shivering painfully she bent over the unknown. By his side she found something damp and liquid. By a great effort she managed to force herself to dip her finger in the blood, and then, with as much regularity as the darkness would allow, she made several marks upon the mare's white side.

These marks, combined, formed the word—

"Help!"

When her task was done she threw her arms around Queenie's neck.

"You must leave me," she said. "It is cruel, and you are the only friend I have left, but I want you to go home to father. Do you understand? Can you understand?"

The mare rubbed her nose against her mistress's hand. The motion seem to say that she *could* understand and she *did*.

Zora waited no longer. She directed Queenie's head toward the exit from the *cul-de-sac*, and, raising her hand, struck the mare a sharp blow—a blow which surprised Queenie as much as it pained her mistress—at the same moment sharply crying:

"Go!"

The white mare went. Recovering from her surprise she darted away obediently. Kendall started up from an attitude of profound dejection, but not in time to stop the mare. She flashed past him, and went bounding away at reckless speed. One moment she was visible; then she utterly disappeared.

If Kendall suspected that any trick had been played, he gave no sign. He did not go to the girls, but, after a moment, resumed his seat.

Day was then near at hand. The darkness gradually faded away to gray, and as this tint became more pronounced, Kendall arose and went to the girls.

"It is nearly time to go on," he announced.

There was no answer.

"Tillie Grimes," he continued. "I have a word to say to you. As a prisoner, you are no longer desirable. You were the captive of Barton Lawless; you are nothing to me. I will release you when we start, if you will promise to remain here for one hour."

"Why should I do that?" Tillie asked.

"I don't want you to send the village people on my track."

"I don't know any reason why I should send them after you."

"You forget that this other girl goes with me."

"What of it?"

"Do you think me blind? Your first act would be to send men to rescue her."

Tillie looked at her companion in captivity.

"I don't know whether I should or not," she replied, almost curtly.

"Tillie," exclaimed Zora, "do not forget that I am a woman, like yourself, and—"

"Did you remember it when I was in trouble?" bitterly demanded Tillie.

Zora's face flushed.

"I may have made mistakes, but you were never in such trouble as mine. I am terribly

situated, while you had only ordinary vexations and worry—"

It was an unfortunate choice of words, and Zora suddenly realized it. She paused, uncertain what to say next, for she had poorly expressed what she tried to convey, but Tillie gave her no time to meditate or plan.

"The Grimes girl" turned quickly upon Kendall.

"I give my promise," she said. "Go when you will; I will remain here one hour after you are gone."

And then she walked aside to avoid further words with Zora.

Kendall smiled grimly and proceeded to make his preparations for departure. He led out two of the remaining horses and saddled them—the bridles had not been removed. When this was done he only awaited the dawn of day, and day soon came.

Then he compelled Zora to mount again, and they rode away. Tillie was left behind. Zora did not again address her, but the look which she sent back haunted Tillie. Whatever Zora was—however much she had injured Jo Grimes's girl—she was a woman in the hands of an unscrupulous man, carried away in helpless captivity.

Tillie watched them out of sight—the rough way hid them when they had gone sixty yards—and then sat down. She intended to keep her promise, and remain the specified hour, but found it no easy task.

Thoughts of Zora made her ill at ease.

In vain she recalled the hardships she had endured at the other girl's hands; all these could not then offset the fact that Zora was in sore trouble. She did not think more gently of her, but she did regret that Zora was a prisoner.

"She is the betrothed of Walter McPherson, and he is Buck Hampton's friend!" she thought.

Suddenly she arose. She had determined to go to the high point of land and see if they were still in sight. What she would do after that she did not know.

She left the *cul-de-sac*, but had gone scarcely thirty yards when she came upon a man. He was lying on the ground, and, at first, she thought him lifeless, but the sound of her movements caused him to open his eyes.

He saw her, gasped, and lifted one hand feebly.

"Gal, don't leave me!" he gasped, quickly, but faintly. "I'm dyin', an' all alone."

It occurred to Tillie that he was probably the third man of those who had attacked Kendall and Lawless, the previous night, and she dimly remembered seeing him in the village.

"You're the Grimes gal, ain't ye?" he pursued.

"Yes."

"I'm glad ter see ye; I'm right glad ter see ye. I've done a bitter wrong ter Jo Grimes, an' I want ter confess it."

"What have you done?" Tillie quickly asked.

"'Twas me an' my mates—all dead, now, I reckon, but me—who took Grimes from jail an' shut him up in the cave. We pounded Foote, the jailer, an' we cut the lock off the door, ter make it seem that Grimes escaped. We did it by orders, though."

"By whose orders?"

"I don't know. Thar was a boss back on't all, but Tete Eagan took orders, an' the rest on us didn't know who the boss was. Ef I could tell, I could also tell who hired Tommy Bowlegs ter shoot McPherson."

"What!" cried Tillie, "do you mean—"

"It was Bowlegs that fired the shot; leastways, I think so. Jo Grimes never did it. One man did all this, but I don't know who he was."

"Surely you can guess," urged Tillie, trembling with excitement.

The wounded man was seized with a paroxysm of choking, and for a moment she thought death at hand.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JULES LE BLAND.

MAKING a strong effort, the wounded man rallied.

"When ye see Buck Hampton," he resumed, in a hoarse whisper, "tell him the attack on Powers, the stranger in town, was meant fur him. The boss knew he had the shoes, an' sent us ter git 'em away, but we got hold o' the wrong man. The shoes seemed ter be o' value, though I dunno why."

"But the man whom you call 'the boss,'" continued Tillie; "have you no idea who he is?"

"No. Eagan knew, but he's dead; I reckon they are all dead but Jules Le Bland."

"Le Bland! Was he one of the gang?"

"Yes. The boss had him do some o' the work, but I don't know what."

"Does Le Bland know who your leader was?"

"I think not, but you kin ask. Gal, it may be weak in me, but I'm a dyin' man, an' I'm sorry fur some o' my work. I hope you'll find out who reelly shot McPherson. Jo Grimes is innocent—"

The speaker paused, made a start, gasped, struggled and fell back heavily. Then he lay still. Tillie, pale and shivering, stood in the presence of death.

A footstep sounded behind her; she wheeled in alarm.

Trail-Lifter, the Modoc stood before her.

Her face flushed with joy. Here was a man trusted by Yank Yellowbird; a man whom she believed she could trust fully, if he was an Indian. Aid had surely come for her. Oh! if only the young Modoc had the power of speech! Even as she thought this, Trail-Lifter's lips unclosed, and distinct words came forth.

"Star Eyes, where is the other white maiden?"

"What!" cried Tillie. "can you speak?"

"This is a time when the dumb talk," imperturbably replied the Indian. "When all is peace, man may well be silent but the mask must be cast aside now. Where is Pike's daughter?"

"Taken away by David Kendall."

Tillie was still in a maze; it was a great surprise to hear Trail-Lifter speak like other men.

"When? Where?" tersely demanded the young Indian.

In a moment all of Tillie's sympathy went out to Zora.

"Come with me," she said, eagerly; "it may not be too late to overtake them. They went this way. Follow me; follow me, I implore you!"

"Where is the trail?" was the cool reply.

His systematic way impressed Tillie, and she led him to where Kendall and his captive had passed. The Modoc's wild eyes flashed brightly.

"Follow, Star Eyes; follow!" he directed.

"The other white maiden shall be found. As for you, there is one near who will be glad to see you."

Thrusting his fingers into his mouth he sounded a peculiar whistle. A reply was returned from a point not over eighty yards away.

"Follow, Star Eyes; follow!" Trail-Lifter again said, and then he ran along the trail like a bloodhound.

He repeated the whistle after a few moments; it was answered close at hand; and then Buck Hampton and Walter McPherson appeared. Tillie's cheeks flushed, and when Buck came quickly forward and took her hand, there was that in his face which made her eyes grow bright.

"Thank Heaven that I see you again and safe!" he exclaimed.

"Are you really glad?" she murmured.

"Glad! You cannot imagine how I have worried—"

Trail-Lifter plucked at Walter's sleeve.

"Come; we bes' go on," he said, falling into broken English. "They two follow; mebbe they have private words to talk. Star Eyes make Buck think much!"

Walter smiled faintly, and then as the Modoc was running along the trail, promptly followed. Buck and Tillie brought up the rear. They were so sure of soon overtaking Kendall that no one thought it best to separate their party, in order to send Tillie back.

Angry words floated up in a canyon, and David Kendall, holding nervously to the rein of Zora's horse, looked about him with a scowl. The labyrinthine character of the way, and his own inexperience, had already brought him to grief.

He had ridden into another *cul-de-sac*.

"We must turn back!" he cried, angrily.

"This is the fiend's own luck!"

"It is the work of Providence!" Zora declared. "David Kendall, you will be thwarted yet."

"I'll kill the man who tries to take you from me!" he exclaimed, fiercely. "I've risked all on the casting of a die, and woe be to him who meddles here!"

He had turned the horses and was leading them from the canyon, but as he passed a huge boulder, and even as the boastful words were upon his lips, he came to grief.

From out the cover sprang a man; he seized Kendall fiercely and dragged him from the saddle. Another moment and they were engaged in a savage struggle.

Zora looked down in alarm and amazement, but as she recognized the new-comer to be Jules Le Bland, her father's cook, she took new hope. Seeing that the men were well matched, and that a revolver had fallen from the belt of one, she sprang to the ground, picked it up and tried to place it in Le Bland's hand.

She succeeded; he grasped it, and, using it as a club, beat Kendall over the head until he fell senseless to the earth.

Le Bland stood panting, but victorious.

"Thank Heaven you are come!" cried Zora. The Frenchman's eyes brightened.

"Are you glad?" he asked.

"Glad! Oh! yes, yes!"

"Divine Zora!" exclaimed the victor, trying to recover his breath, "you till my heart with rapture. My being thrills in the light of your smile, as the harp discourses sweet music beneath the touch of a fine player. Your face is the sun of my existence. When you smile I live and am full of joy; but if you frown, or look sad, my heart is like lead in this breast!"

And he struck the breast in question a violent blow.

"Le Bland," said the amazed girl, "why do you talk so wildly?"

"Because, oh! divine Zora, I love you; because I cannot live without you. Oh! fair star of life, listen to my prayer and bless me. Abide with me as my wife, and existence shall be like a garden of roses. See! I kneel to you!"

Clasping his hands, he dropped upon his knees and flashed wild, burning glances upon her; but, absurd as his words and manner were, from a practical point of view, she saw nothing to laugh at.

Le Bland was terribly in earnest, and he was revealing a fierce, uncontrolled nature which showed him far more dangerous than Kendall had been.

His transition from a formal, respectful servant to a fiery lover was unexpected and startling.

Summoning all her firmness, Zora replied: "Rise, Mr. Le Bland. This is no time or place for such words—"

"It is the time and place of all times and places," he impetuously interrupted. "Tell me you will be my wife!"

"Impossible!"

"Why is it impossible?"

"Because I have no love for you. Rise, sir, and lead me back to my father. I am sorry if you really care for me, but you know as well as I that I am Walter McPherson's pledged wife."

"Would you marry such an effeminate creature?"

Zora started back.

"Enough, sir," she exclaimed, resentfully. "I have no more to say to you. You need not conduct me to Big Missouri; I do not want your company; I will go alone!"

She turned away, but Le Bland sprang to his feet and caught her arm.

"You shall not go!" he cried. "Look you! I have rescued you from Kendall, and you are mine—you shall be mine, whether you will or not. You shall not go back to Big Missouri. From this moment you are my captive, and I will take you away upon this horse. My wife you shall be, by fair means or foul—I swear it!"

He grasped her arm more tightly; his eyes blazed into her face; she uttered a cry for help. He laughed mockingly.

"Help!" he echoed. "Cry again, divine Zora! No one can hear you here. Help shall not come. You are mine—mine only—mine forever!"

He clasped her in his arms and sought to press a kiss upon her lips. He did not succeed. His hands were wrenched away; he was cast to the ground; there was a confused movement of human figures; and then Zora was in Walter McPherson's arms, and Le Bland lay upon the ground, held fast by Trail-Lifter, the Modoc.

The Frenchman raved wildly, but no one noticed him. At the end of two or three minutes his mood changed and he suddenly relapsed into sullen silence.

He saw Buck Hampton and Tillie standing at one side, and saw Walt lead Zora to "the Grimes girl."

"To Miss Grimes," said Walt, in a grateful voice, "you owe a deep debt of gratitude. The Indian has been the trail-follower, but it was she who put us on the track; she who shared the fatigue of the pursuit; she who urged us on."

Zora held out her hand.

"Tillie," said she, "I have wronged you deeply. I am the only child of a rich man. That fact came near ruining me; I grew up proud, vain, peevish and gifted with wretched judgment. I have wronged you greatly, but I am now very sorry. Will you take my hand? Will you forgive me?"

Tillie steadily replied:

"I will take your hand now; I will forgive you when my father is proven innocent. As for myself, I bear no ill-will. I think only of my father."

"I trust that a brighter day is dawning for him," added Buck. "Let us all hasten to the village. I have a theory, and if the trail can be followed to the end, Joseph Grimes may yet be proven an innocent man!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

UNMASKED.

THERE was the sound of a rifle-shot, a chorus of wild whoops, a hearty, defiant volume of shouts, and then the roar of many rifles combined.

Trail-Lifter and the party he led had almost reached the village when this suggestive combination of sounds reached them. The Modoc's eyes flashed, and he ran to a ledge a few feet away, which commanded a view of the town.

All followed him.

By that time the noise in the village had increased, and they were not surprised at what they saw. The Sioux were making another attack, and the settlers were fighting them with the same heroism they had displayed the night before.

It was a wild, desperate scene. The Sioux dashed forward and tried to storm the place, but they met with a stout resistance. Such of the

whites as saw fit had the advantage of cover, and they poured shot after shot into the redskins' irregular line.

Trail-Lifter's eyes flashed more wildly than ever, and his nostrils dilated. He longed to be in that fight, but his place was elsewhere. He looked at Le Bland and Kendall—the latter had been revived, and both were prisoners—and then at Tillie and Zora.

That decided him; he would not leave.

It was easy for the beholders to distinguish Yank Yellowbird. He was the central figure of all; he moved with surprising agility, and where he fought the most execution was done. Many Sioux tried to reach him, to beat down or to shoot him, but he seemed to bear a charmed life.

Hotly raged the fight, but it was comparatively brief. The Sioux were losing heavily, and it was not in human nature to stand up and meet such decimation. They wavered—hesitated—fell back—then broke and fled.

The victory was complete; the village was again cleared of interlopers; and the Sioux were beaten even more decisively than before.

Yank had little fear of another attack. The one just made had been rash and imprudent—he suspected that dissensions among the Sioux had led to it—and he felt sure they would then withdraw.

Half an hour later there was a glad surprise; Buck, Walt and Trail-Lifter returned with Tillie and Zora. Le Bland and Kendall returned also—as prisoners.

Great was the joy of Pythagoras Pike when he saw his daughter thus restored to him. While he was assuring her of this over and over again, Yank spoke with Buck Hampton, and the subject of their conversation was the prisoners, Kendall and Le Bland—especially the latter.

When the mountaineer heard of the part Le Bland had played, he nodded quickly and emphatically.

"I've got the clew I wanted!" he said.

"What is it?"

"I'll tell ye later."

"I think that I can guess now."

"Do ye? Wal, keep it dark, lad; keep it dark. Give me a little time. There are two persons I want ter interview afore I speak right out."

"There is no time like the present, mountaineer."

"I consait you may be right."

Yank spoke thoughtfully, and thereupon fell to caressing his beard with quick movements. Suddenly he aroused and added:

"Take the pris'ners ter the hotel, Buck, an' hold 'em subject ter my call. Ef I tell ye ter bring a sartain man ter me, bring him."

"It shall be done, Nevermiss."

Yank turned away, but was stopped by Tillie. They talked earnestly for several moments, and then the mountaineer went on. His steps were long and quick, and he plainly had an object in view.

Buck took Kendall and Le Bland inside. An hour passed, and then word came from Yank.

"Bring Le Bland to Tommy Bowlegs's room!" was the order.

Hampton obeyed. The Frenchman went without a word, and his manner was nearly as light, gay and independent as ever; but under his unconcerned exterior Buck could see evident nervousness.

Tommy Bowlegs lay in a place strange to him—a civilized bed. It was clear that he would not lie there long. The shadow of death was upon his face. Yank Yellowbird sat by his side when Buck entered with the prisoner. He pointed to chairs and briefly directed:

"Set down!"

Le Bland shrugged his shoulders and obeyed. "Now, Bowlegs," continued Yank, "tell yer story."

The vagabond slowly lifted one hand and pointed at the Frenchman.

"He hired me kill the man you call Buck!"

"That was the day you come ter Big Missouri, Buck; the time Bowlegs took a shot at ye in the timber," exclaimed Yank, with a nod. "What else, Bowlegs?"

"He hire me kill Walt McPherson!"

Once more he pointed to Le Bland.

The Frenchman again shrugged his shoulders.

"*Mon Dieu!* what modesty!" he coolly interpolated. "Is there more you can charge against me?"

"The long an' short on't is," replied Yank, leveling his long finger at the ex-cook, "the fat is in the fire, and the secrets is all out. Bowlegs shot Walt McPherson, an' it was you who hired him ter do it!"

"You are in error, monsieur, but I would not deprive you of an innocent amusement. If you think so, hug your belief!"

His coolness was remarkable.

"I've b'en a good 'eal puzzled by this egregious case," placidly remarked Yank, "but the minute I heard o' yer havin' declared love fur Zora Pike, I ketches on ter the facts. I was pooty sure afore that I knowed all the rest; all but who hired Bowlegs. As nigh as I kin figger it, you, lovin' Zora, detarmined ter beat Walt out in the race. When you heard that Buck was

comin' you didn't like it, as he would be Walt's helper, an' not carin' a cent fur human life, you hired Bowlegs ter kill him by the way.

"Then you hired Bowlegs ter shoot Walt on his weddin' night. It was Fitch's rifle that did the job; but it was Bowlegs who stole it fur the night, not Jo Grimes. Tommy's own rifle was out o' order."

"I've b'en a heap puzzled by some antics o' Miss Nella Bryce, but I've had a talk with her, an' I've got at the hull business. Nella was in love with you, Le Bland. You never give her an artom o' hope, but she clung to, an' when she suspected the truth, she tried ter save ye."

"A pair o' shoes has figgered in this case. They belonged to Zora Pike; was stole by Bowlegs; an' was wrongly s'posed at one time ter hev bearin' on the affair. Nella see Bowlegs an' you talkin' the night afore the shootin', an' Bowlegs had 'em with him then. She see 'em, an', later, was afraid they'd connect you with the shootin'."

"One evenin' Zora see Bowlegs nigh the house, an' talked with him a bit on ord'nary affairs, but as he was goin' away Nella fastened onter him, an' hired him ter steal the shoes a second time. He tried, but was trapped by Buck in his room. This was bad fur Tommy, who lost 'em the first time at the tannery, when Buck took him by surprise; an' Tommy jumped inter the river, sorter impulsive."

"When Bowlegs failed ter steal the shoes from Buck's room, Nella tried another trick. She went ter Zora, an', sayin' she had keerslessly lost the shoes, asked Zora ter git 'em back from Buck, so that His Majesty wouldn't hear on it an' scold her—Nella. Zora good naturedly did it, tharby puzzlin' us a good bit. We've had a heap ter puzzle us, but I kep' right on investigatin', an' I finally got it all out plain 'cept who hired Bowlegs. I never knew that until I knowed you'd made love ter Zora, Le Bland; then it popped inter my mind sudden that you was the critter."

"Lookin' back, Mr. Cook, I remember now you took pains ter show yerself ter me, an' others, jest 'fore Walt was shot. That was ter prove an *alibi*, I consait. Now, mister, you kin do some talkin'."

"I don't want to do any 'talkin','" retorted Le Bland.

"Not a word ter say in defense o' yerself?"

"Not one—except that I am innocent."

"Mebbe you'll prove it," replied Yank, dryly, as he arose. "Anyhow, Buck, we'll lock the atrocious insex up."

This they did, and then Yank received news that pleased him greatly; Long Knife and his Sioux had hastily departed north. The siege was past.

Going into the main room, Buck and Yank saw Pythagoras Pike talking with unexpecting cheerfulness with Zora and McPherson. Tillie stood apart, looking out of the window thoughtfully, and the two men went to her.

"Little woman," said Yank, "hev you heerd the news?"

"Trail-Lifter tells me that the real would-be assassin of Walter McPherson is really found. I was waiting to see you."

Her manner was eager, and her eyes devoured them with questions.

"It's true as ye live, gal."

A radiant expression appeared on her face.

"Thank God!—thank God!" she murmured.

Her head was bent for a moment, but was quickly raised as she added:

"Thank Him, and next, thank you too, to whom I owe all under Heaven."

She gave a hand to each.

"Little woman," replied Yank, in a voice strangely husky, "your gratitude is worth a million times more'n my efforts, which was no more than the Yellowbird pedigree demanded on me. Still, I did my best, laborin' as I did with the weak sister an' the egregious newrolgy."

"If I may name my reward, Miss Grimes," added Buck Hampton, in a low voice, "let it be your continued regard and friendship."

Tillie blushed most becomingly.

"They shall be yours," she replied.

"That is enough, for it is happiness," he answered, pressing her hand, whereupon Yank winked knowingly at both.

Pythagoras Pike approached.

"Miss Grimes, I have heard the news, and I congratulate you," he said. "May I take your hand?"

Tillie gave it freely.

"I am glad to see Mr. Grimes vindicated, His Majesty added. "Friend Nevermiss, I am going to run my tannery, after all, but I have decided to employ only white men; I'll bring enough here so the Sioux will not dare make another outbreak. As for civilizing them, I leave that to other men. From now, call me anything but a philosopher!"

He spoke fervently, and Yank Yellowbird smiled quietly.

"I consait you're wise ter change yer base—you be, by hurley! Injins will be Injins, an' we can't change the way o' Natur'. When we try it, triberlations an' distresses come onter us in a flock. The only Injin I ever saw who was a white man, was Trail-Lifter."

"I am surprised to know that young Modoc can actually talk."

"It's b'en a secret, I consait; but 'twas his fancy an' mine. He's a man o' few words, an' in our work ter unhorse egregious rascals, it sorter seemed fit an' proper; but last night things got so complerated he used his tongue ter others than me. We leave Big Missouri right away, the Modoc an' I do; an' I reckon he'll be dumb ag'in in the very fu'st town we strike. I consait I shall hev the newrolgy, myself, fur it's ravin' around in my system. Whatever distempers ketches us, how's ever, you kin depend on Still Tongue an' me ter uphold the Yellowbird pedigree ter the best o' our ability—you kin, by hurley!"

Time brings many changes. What has it done in the case of our characters?

Big Missouri has grown to be a large, thriving city, and the Duke of Dakota is still its leading man. His partner, Walter McPherson, shares his honors, and Mrs. Zora McPherson, who cast off some imperfections of character as she grew older, is beloved by both.

In Lincoln, Nebraska, live Buck Hampton and Tillie, his wife. With them is Joseph Grimes, free from every suspicion of wrong-doing, and now a mild, genial, happy old man. There is peace between the Hamptons and McPhersons, but they never meet now. There is a tacit belief that it is best so; some life-clouds are hard to sweep away, and they can live apart without feeling resentment. Buck, for one, does not care to have the old, dark days brought to Tillie's mind too vividly.

Tommy Bowlegs died of his wound; Le Bland, finding his guilt fully proven, tried to escape and was shot by the jailer; while Kendall has just finished a term in prison for his offenses.

Bart Lawless sleeps in an unmarked grave among the mountains. Much that he said to Tillie in their last interview was wholly false.

Nella Bryce, still attached to Le Bland, remained in Big Missouri until his violent death, and then suddenly disappeared.

Yank Yellowbird and Trail-Lifter resumed their wandering life. No other home than the mountains and prairies, and the lakes and rivers, would suit them. What better home could there be? It was the wide West! Thousands of acres were open to their nomadic feet, and there they could come and go, untrammelled by the petty laws of society; undirected by any human will save their own; and as free as the air that waves the grass of the prairie and the tree of the mountain.

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- 334 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Detective.
- 417 Webfoot Mose, the Tramp Detective.
- 422 Baby Sam, the Boy Giant of the Yellowstone.
- 444 Little Buckskin, the Young Prairie Centaur.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 463 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 473 Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH.

- 23 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
- 37 The Hidden Lodge; or, The Little Hunter.
- 47 Nightingale Nat; or, The Forest Captains.
- 64 Dandy Jack; or, The Outlaws of the Oregon Trail.
- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 128 Klown Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch, Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
- 207 Navajo Nick, the Boy Gold Hunter.
- 215 Captain Bullet; or, Little Topknot's Crusade.
- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
- 241 Bill Bravo; or, The Ranges of the Rockies.
- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
- 267 The Buckskin Detective.
- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperadoes.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowie Blade of Cosabopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Bar Bally.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Trump Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pards; or, The Terror of Take-Noties.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Ptitless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 356 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
- 366 Velvet Foot, the Indian Detective.
- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Foe.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robba.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter.
- 425 Texas Trump, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox.
- 445 The City Sleuths; or, Red Rolfe's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge.

LATEST AND NEW ISSUES.

- 527 The Jolly Pards to the Rescue. By P. S. Warne.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows. By T. C. Harbaugh.
- 529 Deadwood Dick's Danger Ducks. By E. L. Wheeler.
- 530 The Buckskin Bowers. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 531 Daisy Dare, the Sport from Denver. By William G. Patton.
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- 160 Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man with the Sand.
- 182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.
- 192 The Lightning Sport.
- 214 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch.
- 229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, The Little Sport.
- 268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.
- 300 A Sport in Spectacles; or, The Bad Time at Bunco.
- 333 Derringer Dick, the Man with the Drop.
- 344 Double Shot Dave of the Left Hand.
- 356 Three Handsome Sports; or, The Double Combination.
- 375 Royal George, the Three in One.
- 396 The Piper Detective.
- 402 Snapshot Sam; or, The Angels' Flat Racket.
- 429 Hair Trigger Tom of Red Bend.
- 459 Major Sunshine, the Man of Three Lives.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

- 8 The Headless Horseman; A Strange Story of Texas.
- 12 The Death-Shot; or, Tracked to Death.
- 55 The Scalp Hunters. A Romance of the Plains.
- 66 The Specter Barque. A Tale of the Pacific.
- 74 The Captain of the Rifles; or, The Queen of the Lakes.
- 200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Mexico.
- 208 The White Chief. A Romance of Northern Mexico.
- 213 The War Trail; or, The Hunt of the Wild Horse.
- 218 The Wild Huntress; or, The Squatter's Vengeance.
- 228 The Maroon. A Tale of Voodoo and Obeah.
- 234 The Hunter's Feast.
- 267 The White Squaw.

BY CAPT. FRED. WHITTAKER.

- 39 The Russian Spy; or, The Starry Cross Brothers.
- 65 The Red Rajah; or, The Scourge of the Indies.
- 69 The Irish Captain. A Tale of Fontenoy.
- 96 Double Death; or, The Spy of Wyoming.
- 98 The Rock Rider; or, The Spirit of the Sierra.
- 108 The Duke of Diamonds.
- 115 The Severed Head; or, The Secret of Castle Coucy.
- 132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.
- 159 Red Rudiger, the Archer.
- 174 The Phantom Knights.
- 187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers.
- 193 The Man in Red.
- 206 One Eye, the Cannoneer.
- 211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport.
- 215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys.
- 226 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's.
- 230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880.
- 242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash.
- 247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade.
- 253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists.
- 265 Old Double-Sword; or, Pilots and Pirates.
- 272 Seth Slocum, Railroad Surveyor.
- 277 The Saucy Jane, Privateer.
- 284 The Three Frigates; or, Old Ironsides' Revenge.
- 290 The Lost Corvette; or, Blakeley's Last Cruise.
- 295 Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter.
- 303 Top-Notch Tom, the Cowboy Outlaw.
- 310 The Marshal of Satanstown; or, The Cattle-Lifters' League.
- 326 The Whitest Man in the Mines.
- 378 John Armstrong, Mechanic.
- 406 Old Pop Hicks, Showman.
- 412 Larry Locke, the Man of Iron.
- 445 Journeyman John, the Champion.

BY OLL COOMES.

- 7 Death-Notch, the Destroyer.
- 43 Dakota Dan, the Reckless Ranger.
- 44 Old Dan Rackback, the Great Extreminator.
- 46 Bowie-Knife Ben, the Nor'west Hunter.
- 48 Idaho Tom, the Young Outlaw of Silverland.
- 51 Red Rob, the Boy Road-Agent.
- 90 The Giant Rifleman; or, Wild Camp Life.
- 127 Long Beard, the Giant Spy.
- 143 One-Armed Alf, the Giant Hunter.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.

- 176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.
- 194 Don Sombbrero, the California Road Gent.
- 202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.
- 219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission.
- 223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.
- 227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho.
- 237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.
- 245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.
- 258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.
- 263 Iron-Armed Abe, the Hunchback Destroyer.
- 266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.
- 271 Stonefist, of Big Nugget Bend.
- 276 Texa; Click the Southwest Detective.
- 285 Lightning Bolt, the Canyon Terror.
- 291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.
- 305 Silver-Plated Sol, the Montana Rover.
- 311 Heavy Hand; or, The Marked Men.
- 323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.

BY SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

- 3 Kit Carson, Jr., the Crack Shot.
- 90 Wild Will, the Mad Ranchero.
- 178 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate.
- 186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph.
- 191 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky and his Pards.
- 195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, The Magnolias Maid.
- 199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver.
- 204 Big Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat.
- 212 The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute Men.
- 217 The Serpent of El Paso; or, Frontier Frank.
- 221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot."
- 225 Rocky Mountain Al; or, The Waif of the Range.
- 239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army.
- 244 Merciless Mart, the Man Tiger of Missouri.
- 250 The Rough Riders; or, Sharp Eye the Scourge.
- 256 Double Dan the Dastard; or, The Pirates.
- 264 The Crooked Three.
- 269 The Bayou Bravo; or, The Terrible Trail.
- 273 Mountain Mose, the Gorge Outlaw.
- 282 The Merciless Marauders; or, Carl's Revenge.
- 287 Dandy Dave and his Horse, White Stocking.
- 293 Stampede Steve; or, The Doom of the Double Face.
- 301 Bowlder Bill; or, The Man from Taos.
- 309 Raybold, the Rattling Ranger.
- 322 The Crimson Coyotes; or, Nita the Nemesis.
- 328 King Kent; or, The Bandits of the Bason.
- 342 Blanco Bill, the Mustang Monarch.
- 358 The Prince of Pan Out.
- 371 Gold Buttons; or, The Up Range Pards.

BY DR. J. H. ROBINSON.

- 13 Pathaway; or, Nick Whiffles, the old Nor'west Trapper.
- 17 Nightshade; or, The Robber Prince.
- 22 Whitelaw; or, Nattie of the Lake Shore.
- 37 Hurl, the Hunchback; or, The Santee Sword-maker.
- 53 Silver Knife; or, The Rocky Mountain Ranger.
- 70 Hydrabad, the Strangler.
- 73 The Knights of the Red Cross; or, The Granada Magician.
- 163 Ben Brion; or, Redpath, the Avenger.

BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.
- 117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.
- 142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.
- 156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.
- 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
- 185 The Phantom Mazepa; or, The Hyena.
- 448 Hark Kenton, the Traitor.

BY MAJOR DANIEL BOONE DUMONT.

- 333 Silver Sam, the Detective.
- 339 Colonel Double-Edge, the Cattle Baron's Pard.
- 411 The White Crook; or, Old Hark's Fortress.
- 420 The Old River Sport; or, A Man of Honor.
- 439 Salamander Sam.
- 454 The Night Raider.
- 464 Sandycraw, the Man of Grit.

BY GEORGE ST. GEORGE.

- 296 Duncan, the Sea Diver.
- 417 Tucson Tom; or, The Fire Trailers.

BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.
- 422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
- 436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
- 452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.

- 398 Sleepless Eye, the Pacific Detective.
- 423 The Giant Horseman.

BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 53 Silver Sam; or, The Mystery of Deadwood City.
- 87 The Scarlet Captain; or, Prisoner of the Tower.
- 106 Shamus O'Brien, the Bould Boy of Glingal.

BY NEWTON M. CURTISS.

- 120 The Texan Spy; or, The Prairie Guide.
- 254 Giant Jake, the Patrol of the Mountain.

BY FRANCIS JOHNSON.

- 25 The Gold Guide; or, Steel Arm, Regulator.
- 26 The Death Track; or, The Mountain Outlaws.
- 123 Alapaha the Squaw; or, The Border Renegades.
- 124 Assowaum the Avenger; or, The Doom of the Destroyer.
- 135 The Bush Ranger; or, The Half-Breed Rajah.
- 136 The Outlaw Hunter; or, The Bush Ranger.
- 138 The Border Bandit; or, The Horse Thief's Trail.

BY C. DUNNING CLARK.

- 164 The King's Fool.
- 183 Gilbert the Guide.

BY COL. THOMAS H. MONSTERY.

- 82 Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.
- 126 The Demon Duelist; or, The League of Steel.
- 143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League.
- 150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen.
- 157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Swordmasters.
- 169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels.
- 236 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show.
- 262 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Toughs.
- 332 Spring-Heel Jack; or, The Masked Mystery.

BY ISAAC HAWKS, Ex-Detective.

- 232 Orson Oxx; or, The River Mystery.
- 240 A Cool Head; or, Orson Oxx in Peril.

BY PROF. J. H. INGRAHAM.

- 113 The Sea Slipper; or, The Freebooters.
- 118 The Burglar Captain; or, The Fallen Star.
- 314 Lafitte; or, The Pirate of the Gulf.
- 316 Lafitte's Lieutenant; or, Child of the Sea.

BY GUSTAVE AIMARD.

- 15 The Tiger Slayer; or, Eagle Heart to the Rescue.
- 19 Red Cedar, the Prairie Outlaw.
- 20 The Bandit at Bay; or, The Prairie Pirates.
- 21 The Trapper's Daughter; or, The Outlaw's Fate.
- 24 Prairie Flower.
- 62 Loyal Heart; or, The Trappers of Arkansas.
- 149 The Border Rifles. A Tale of the Texan War.
- 151 The Freebooters. A Story of the Texan War.
- 153 The White Scalper.

MISCELLANEOUS.

- 6 Wildcat Bob, the Boss Bruiser. By Edward L. Wheeler.
- 9 Handy Andy. By Samuel Lover.
- 10 Vidoeq, the French Police Spy. Written by himself.
- 11 Midshipman Easy. By Captain Maryatt.
- 32 B'boys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians.
- 60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By Frank Dumont.
- 68 The Fighting Trapper. By Captain J. F. C. Adams.
- 76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.
- 78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.
- 102 The Masked Band; or, The Man without a Name. By George L. Aiken.
- 110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.
- 125 The Blacksmith Outlaw; or, Merrie England. By Harrison Ainsworth.
- 133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.
- 140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
- 144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.
- 146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.
- 152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief.
- 153 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.
- 166 Owllet, the Robber Prince. By Septimus R. Urban.
- 179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.
- 190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.
- 261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.
- 275 The Smuggler Cutter; or, The Cavern in the Cliff. By J. D. Conroy.
- 312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.
- 330 Cop Colt, the Quaker City Detective. By Charles Morris.
- 350 Flash Falcon, the Society Detective. By Weldon J. Cobb.
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- 2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.
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- 89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.
- 103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.
- 104 Montezuma, the Merciless.
- 109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.
- 116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.
- 121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.
- 128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.
- 131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trapper.
- 134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.
- 139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.
- 172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.
- 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.
- 216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.
- 220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.
- 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
- 231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.
- 235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.
- 246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.
- 253 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.
- 259 Outlaw and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.
- 261 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.
- 307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.
- 318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.
- 325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.
- 329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.
- 336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.
- 341 The Sea Desperado.
- 346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.
- 362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
- 364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.
- 369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.
- 373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.
- 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
- 388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.
- 393 The Convict Captain; or, The Battles of the Buccaneers.
- 399 The New Monte Cristo.
- 418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.
- 425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.
- 430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.
- 435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.
- 446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.
- 457 The Sea Insurgent.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 279 The Gold Dragoon; or, The California Bloodhound.
- 297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.
- 385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.
- 405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.
- 415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.
- 427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.
- 437 Deep Duck, the Silent Sleuth.
- 442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.
- 449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.
- 455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.
- 463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

- 278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.
- 294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.
- 321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.
- 335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.
- 340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.
- 347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."
- 352 The Desperate Dozen.
- 365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.
- 374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
- 382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
- 392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
- 400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.
- 407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
- 413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
- 421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
- 434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
- 441 The California Sleuth.
- 447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
- 453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
- 460 Captain Coldgrip, the City Sleuth.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS.

- 5 The Fire Fiends; or, Hercules Hunchback.
- 95 Azhort, the Axman; or, The Palace Secrets.
- 100 The French Spy; or, The Bride of Paris.
- 167 The Man of Steel. Tale of Love and Terror.
- 185 Man Spider; or, The Beautiful Sphinx.
- 238 Hank Hound, the Crescent City Detective.
- 260 The Masked Mystery; or, The Black Crescent.
- 288 Electro Pete, the Man of Fire.
- 306 The Roughs of Richmond.
- 313 Mark Magic, Detective.
- 334 The Cipher Detective; or, Mark Magic's New Trail.
- 343 The Head Hunter; or, Mark Magic in the Mine.
- 357 Jack Simons, Detective.

BY BUFFALO BILL (Hon. W. F. Cody).

- 53 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.
- 83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.
- 243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
- 304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
- 319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
- 394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
- 397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
- 401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
- 414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.
- 30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.
- 40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.
- 45 Old Bull's-Eye, the Lightning Shot.
- 47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.
- 50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.
- 64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.
- 67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.
- 71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.
- 88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.
- 105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.
- 119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazoo Man-Hunters.
- 127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.
- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.
- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible.
- 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.
- 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.
- 197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.
- 201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.
- 233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.
- 241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.
- 249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.
- 257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Hard Man from 'Way Back.
- 283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.
- 286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.
- 292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.
- 302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.
- 317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.
- 324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.
- 331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.
- 339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.
- 345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.
- 351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.
- 355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.
- 360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.
- 367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.
- 372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.
- 379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.
- 387 Dink Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.
- 395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.
- 402 The Nameless Sport.
- 409 Lob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.
- 416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.
- 426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Spy of the Secret Service.
- 433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.
- 438 Oklahoma Nick.
- 443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.
- 450 The Rustler Detective.
- 458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.
- 466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
- 222 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.
- 248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.
- 274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.
- 289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.
- 293 L. gzer Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
- 308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
- 315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
- 327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
- 337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.
- 348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.
- 368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.

BY LEON LEWIS.

- 428 The Flying Glim; or, The Island Lure.
- 456 The Demon Steer.

BY NED BUNTLINE.

- 14 Thayendanagea, the Scourge; or, The War-Eagle.
- 16 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.
- 18 The Sea Bandit; or, The Queen of the Isle.
- 23 The Red Warrior; or, The Comanche Lover.
- 61 Captain Seawolf, the Privateer.
- 111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
- 122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.
- 270 Andros the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
- 361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.

BY JACKSON KNOX—"Old Hawk."

- 386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.
- 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
- 444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.
- 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
- 462 The Circus Detective.

BY PERCY B. ST. JOHN.

- 57 The Silent Hunter.
- 86 The Big Hunter; or, The Queen of the Woods.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 1 A Hard Crowd; or, Gentleman Sam's Sister.
- 4 The Kidnapper; or, The Northwest Shanghai.
- 29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.
- 54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.
- 80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.
- 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
- 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
- 251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.
- 280 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.
- 299 Three of a Kind; or, Tiger Dick, Iron Despard and the Sportive Sport.
- 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
- 359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.
- 380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.
- 404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.
- 431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.
- 31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.
- 33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.
- 34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.
- 35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.
- 36 Injun Dick; or, The Death-Shot of Shasta.
- 38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.
- 41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.
- 42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.
- 49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.
- 56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.
- 59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.
- 63 The Winged Whale; or, The Red Rupert of Gulf.
- 72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.
- 75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.
- 77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.
- 79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.
- 81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.
- 84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.
- 91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.
- 93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.
- 97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.
- 101 The Man from New York.
- 107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.
- 112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.
- 130 Captain Volcano; or, The Man of Red Revolvers.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.
- 252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.
- 320 The Genteel Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.
- 349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.
- 354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.
- 363 Crowningshield, the Sleuth; or, Pitiless as Death.
- 370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.
- 376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.
- 381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.
- 384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.
- 391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.
- 408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.
- 419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.
- 423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.
- 440 The High Horse of the Pacific.
- 461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.
- 465 The Actor Detective.

LATEST AND NEW ISSUES.

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